

**Faculty, Staff, and Student Perceptions of the Transgender and Gender-nonconforming  
(TGNC) Student Experiences at Carnegie Mellon University**

by

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A limited amount of research has been conducted examining the experiences of Transgender and Gender-nonconforming (TGNC) student populations within the context of higher education. In an attempt to learn more about the experiences of TGNC populations at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), this inquiry utilized a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews of self-identified TGNC students, faculty, and staff to explore the perceptions of TGNC students attending Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). Eight TGNC participants with current affiliations with CMU as students, faculty, or staff shared their lived experiences and perceptions with regard to how TGNC students, both graduate and undergraduate, attempt to navigate the campus climate. The results of this inquiry indicate that the embedded binary gender configurations found in the physical infrastructures of campus, as well as the cultural engagement around gender identities beyond this binary, create various obstacles for the TGNC on campus that include inadequate access to bathrooms, housing, and other physical structures of support for this community. Recommendations are offered specifically for CMU, offering suggestions for necessary tools in creating and maintaining a TGNC-inclusive campus and climate, which may also be applicable across all institutions of higher education.

Keywords: Transgender, higher education, Gender-nonconforming, gender binary, genderism, education, cisgender, infrastructure, liberation

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	x
1.0 Overview .....	1
1.1 Purpose of Inquiry.....	3
1.2 Inquiry Approach.....	5
1.2.1 Inquiry Setting.....	6
1.3 Significance of Inquiry .....	9
1.3.1 Delimitations of Study.....	10
1.4 Conclusion .....	11
2.0 Literature Review .....	12
2.1 TGNC Terms and Concepts .....	13
2.2 TGNC Experiences on Campus .....	20
2.2.1 TGNC Graduate Student Experiences.....	25
2.3 Resources for TGNC Students on College Campuses.....	27
2.4 Conclusion .....	29
3.0 Inquiry Methodology .....	31
3.1 Inquiry Setting.....	31
3.1.1 Epistemology.....	34
3.1.2 Reflexivity .....	35
3.2 Inquiry Approach.....	37
3.2.1 Data Source.....	38
3.2.2 Data Analysis .....	39

3.2.3 Interview Summary .....	40
3.2.4 Sample .....	41
3.2.5 Limitations.....	45
3.3 Conclusion .....	45
4.0 Findings.....	47
4.1 Navigating On-campus Infrastructure .....	48
4.1.1 Insufficient Bathroom Facilities .....	48
4.1.2 On-Campus Housing.....	51
4.1.3 Lack of TGNC-Centered Support at CMU .....	52
4.2 Negative Experiences on Campus .....	55
4.2.1 “Passing” in Gendered Spaces .....	56
4.2.2 Safety Concerns within Gendered Spaces.....	57
4.2.3 Misgendering and Pronouns .....	60
4.3 A Labor of Love: TGNC Self-Advocacy .....	65
4.4 Conclusion .....	68
5.0 Conclusions, Implications & Recommendations.....	70
5.1 Key Finding #1: From Bathrooms to More TGNC-inclusive Spaces on Campus..	70
5.2 Key Finding #2: Educators Lack an Understanding of the Experiences of TGNC People.....	72
5.3 Key Finding #3: Negative Experiences: Symptoms of TGNC Erasure .....	74
5.4 Recommendations for Carnegie Mellon University .....	77
5.4.1 Recommendation #1: Increase TGNC Training for All .....	77
5.4.2 Recommendation #2: Create More TGNC Resources & Infrastructures ....	79

5.4.3 Recommendation #3: Assess the Institution’s Ability to Serve TGNC Populations .....	81
5.5 Demonstration of Scholarly Practice .....	82
5.6 Implications for Research .....	83
5.7 Conclusion .....	84
Appendix A Recruitment and Invitation to Participate Email.....	85
Appendix B Participant Information Form .....	87
Appendix C Consent Script & Interview Protocol .....	89
References .....	93



## List of Tables

### Table 1 TGNC Participants by CMU Affiliation, Gender Identity, Pronouns, and Race ( $N=8$ )

..... 44

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## 1.0 Overview

Many studies have been conducted over the years with lesbian, gay, bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) populations, however, studies with a specific focus on Transgender and Gender-nonconforming (TGNC) populations are still scarce (Nagoshi et al., 2008). When seeking to understand the experiences of TGNC people, they can be difficult to identify because “data on gender identity is not routinely collected in population health surveys (e.g., U.S. Census), in medical record systems, or in routine demographics for research” (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018, p. 25). These practices are no different within higher education. However, as the TGNC populations have become more visible and as more TGNC students demand to be recognized by colleges and universities across the nation, there has been an emergence of literature.

One common theme throughout studies that examine the TGNC experiences of students within higher education is that of institutionalized oppression in the form of genderism, which perpetuates the assumption that gender only operates within the gender binary of <sup>1</sup>Female and male and/or sex assignment at birth (Jourian, 2015). Effrig, Bieschke, and Locke (2011), for example, found that,

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<sup>1</sup> Female will be capitalized throughout the content of this paper to emphasize the intersectionality and oppression faced within, but not limited to, the constructs of gender and feminism.

Transgender students were [also] more likely than students who identified as [cisgender] men or <sup>2</sup>Womxn to have had negative perceptions of campus climate, considered leaving their college, feared for their safety because of their gender identity, and avoided disclosing their gender identity because they feared negative consequences and intimidation. (p. 143)

Despite evolving research, it is not apparent as to what and if much is being done to shift gender bias and gender oppression experienced by TGNC communities seeking to exist and thrive within higher education. Jourian (2015) argues that higher education and the systems embedded within the institutional structures on college campuses must be addressed given the experiences shared by Transgender populations within this study. Within the context of higher education, TGNC populations could have a range of experiences, including but are not limited to: hostile campus climates; feelings of isolation and rejection by cisgender peers, faculty, and staff; inadequate healthcare options and mental health support/coverage; as well as a significant lack of educational policies and practices embedded at the institutional level.

This inquiry focused on Transgender (an umbrella term often referring to and used to describe those who transgress the binary boundaries of gender) and Gender-nonconforming (individuals whose gender identity does not conform to the societal and cultural expectations and/or confines of male/Female constructs of gender internally and/or externally) students (Smith & Levitt, n.d.) with the goal of understanding their lived experiences in one institution. According to Nicolazzo et al. (2017), much of the existing TGNC research lacks the scientific rigor and/or is

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<sup>2</sup> Women will be used as an alternative term to Women/Woman to be explicitly inclusive of Transgender Womxn and Womxn of Color and to acknowledge the intersections and minoritization faced by Womxn seeking to exist in society. As with Female, Womxn will also be capitalized throughout.

not theoretically grounded and that existing research about the Transgender experience “centers on a deficiency discourse that situates [Transgender] individuals as victims of violence, harm, harassment, ostracism and/or performing worse than their cisgender peers across various measures and indicators” (p. 20). Without a thorough examination of the experiences of TGNC populations on college campuses, these assumptions and deficit models have continued to narrate a victimized mentality, perpetuating a false narrative that these populations are “problems to be fixed,” effectively dehumanizing the existence of TGNC people on college campuses. In order to address the systemic layers of oppression and genderism affecting the TGNC populations within higher education, there must first be an understanding of the lived experiences of the TGNC communities on college campuses. Only then can recommendations for more inclusive and equitable campus climates be made.

### **1.1 Purpose of Inquiry**

From the perspective of someone who identifies as a cisgender Womxn (someone whose current gender identity aligns with sex assigned at birth), gender and the ways in which it socially intertwines in daily activity can be easily overlooked. As a <sup>3</sup>Black, Queer, cisgender Womxn who expresses traditionally masculine to the world, it became easy to operate day-to-day from my minoritized identity spaces. Therefore, as an individual who still identifies – by definition and

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<sup>3</sup> “Black” will be capitalized throughout the content of this paper to acknowledge the history and people who identify with the Black community, including those of African diaspora and within the continent of Africa (Press, 2020).

lived experience – as cisgender, focusing on the TGNC populations enforces a measure of accountability and to recognize my own spaces of gender privilege. I strive, both personally and professionally, to live and act in accordance with values rooted in social justice, inclusion, and equity. And while my experiences with discrimination and oppression fall in line with my subjectivities, I feel called and challenged to step outside of myself and seek to conduct an inquiry on a topic and with community members with whom I seek to be in alliance with, and who share in a common goal of engaging and centering social justice, equity, and inclusion. As a practitioner in the field of higher education over the last 10+ years, I’ve seen evidence of the gender assumptions that have been and continue to be made throughout various structures embedded within institutions where I have been employed. These assumptions include but are not limited to: the admissions processes, on-campus housing options, forms and documents, and available resources and support structures dedicated to individuals within the higher education context.

I began working at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in 2015, holding a dual appointment as both a Housefellow and as the Coordinator of LGBTQ+ Resources for the campus community. After about a year and a half, I transitioned into the Alumni Association as an Assistant Director of Alumni Relations, where I was able to do more intersectional engagement work with our affinity-based alumni networks—bridging the gap between our minoritized alumni and student populations. As a Black, Queer, cisgender/masculine-expressive Womxn, I have both a personal and professional vested interest in TGNC issues of equity, inclusion, and access within my place of practice at CMU. As I take the time to peel back layers of my identity, focusing in on my Black racial identity, I find myself in a space of critical reflection as I become more intimately connected to this inquiry. Remembering every moment, in college and graduate school, where I was the “only one”—whether it was on my softball team, in my exercise science core curriculum



courses, on the Resident Assistant (RA) staff or in my student organizations—I realized that despite these dynamics, I simultaneously de-prioritized the consciousness of my racial identity, for the ability to bask in my cisgender privilege by default. It was during my time in college, specifically, that my race and gender identities were the only “visible” aspects of my existence as a college student. As the literature reveals, the experiences of navigating higher education as a TGNC student pale in comparison to those of cisgender students, including myself. Capturing data about the experiences of the TGNC populations at CMU will create foundational work at the institutional level as I continue my tenure at CMU, and will also provide additional support and justification for an institutional culture shift toward a stronger pathway of inclusion, equity, and access for our current and future TGNC students, staff, and faculty.

Particular to the higher education context and observed assumptions related to what TGNC students have disclosed to me personally in previous and current professional roles, the purpose of this inquiry explored, captured, and developed a better understanding of the existing perceptions and lived experiences of TGNC students at CMU. With regard to my place of practice, the following inquiry question was addressed: What are the perceptions held by students, staff, and faculty who self-disclose and/or self-identify as TGNC of the student experiences of current TGNC undergraduate and graduate students at Carnegie Mellon University?

## **1.2 Inquiry Approach**

A qualitative design was the most appropriate approach for capturing the experiences of undergraduate and graduate TGNC students at CMU. I approached this inquiry by seeking out between six and 10 individuals, at least three graduate students and three undergraduate students,

to participate in a 60-90-minute semi-structured interview via videoconference (Zoom). While constructing a survey would have been more convenient and expeditious, Renn (2010) argued that there are already too many existing LGBT studies that do a major disservice to the field by taking this approach. Interviews allowed for the raw narratives of perceptions and student experiences, leaving little room for misinterpretation. Based on the themes that consistently surfaced in existing literature on the TGNC populations within the context of higher education, my interview methodology helped to uncover possible themes and experiences surrounding accessibility and visibility of support and resources; housing options, processes, and accessibility; restroom/bathroom accessibility; visibility and perception of safety; and experiences with and representation among peers, faculty, and staff.

### **1.2.1 Inquiry Setting**

Carnegie Mellon University is a highly selective private, R1 institution nestled within the Pittsburgh cluster of colleges and universities in Oakland, Pennsylvania, where the cost of attendance for the 2019-2020 academic year exceeded \$74,000. Some of the top industries and companies such as Google, Deloitte, Uber and leading theatre companies actively recruit CMU graduates (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-b) from year to year. Ranking in the top 25 colleges and universities in the country, CMU is home to seven schools and colleges: the College of Engineering, the College of Fine Arts, Dietrich College of Humanities & Social Sciences, Heinz College of Information Systems and Public Policy, Mellon College of Science, School of Computer Science, and the Tepper School of Business (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-a). CMU also takes great pride in the globalization of the institution, having established satellite locations

in Rwanda, Australia, and Qatar, which have attracted domestic and international students alike to seek a world-class education from around the world (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-a).

According to the CMU enrollment and persistence data, there were 7,022 undergraduates and 7,777 graduate students enrolled in the Fall of 2019 (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-e). Representation of demographic data by gender reports only “birth sex,” according to Institutional Research and Analysis (Carnegie Mellon University, 2018). Of the 7,022 undergraduate students, 3,525 were Female/Women, and 3,497 were male/men. For the 2019-2020 school year graduate student population of 7,777, there were 2,885 Females/Women and 4,892 males/men.

The CMU enrollment and persistence data categorizes race and ethnicity by categories consisting of the following groupings: Nonresident aliens; Hispanic/Latino; white, non-Hispanic; American Indian or Alaska Native, non-Hispanic; Asian, non-Hispanic; and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-e). For graduate and undergraduate degree-seeking enrollment data respectively, 330 students were categorized as having an underrepresented race and 4,878 international students; 940 were categorized as having an “underrepresented race,” and 1,530 were international students. Carnegie Mellon University notes in the “Student Diversity” report presented by the Admissions office, that approximately 15% of students in the incoming First-Year class represent Black/African American (non-Hispanic), Native American, and Latino/x populations, combined. And an additional 17% of the incoming First-Year class is characterized by the international student populations (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-b). Deconstructing these numbers even further, Black/African (non-Hispanic) enrolled undergraduate students make up approximately 3.5%; 8.52% Hispanic/Latino/x; and 0.01% of American Indian or Alaska Native (non-Hispanic) are represented in this First-Year 2019-2020 class (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-e).

Furthermore, CMU has a grand total of 1,408 faculty according to the 2018 Institutional Research and Analysis (IRA) data (Carnegie Mellon University, 2018). Of those faculty, 418 are Female, 58 are listed as racial minorities (non-white/underrepresented race), and 212 are international. By comparison, of the 4,808 staff employed at the University, 2,342 are Female, 383 are listed as racial minorities (non-white/underrepresented race) and 464 are international (Carnegie Mellon University, 2018).

While the institution does collect demographic information for race and ethnicity from its applicants, and offers a voluntary option for faculty and staff to disclose their race and ethnicity, it does not collect sexual orientation data from any population affiliated with the University, and has not made available the data that is available for undergraduate students who have opted to share their current gender identity (in addition to sex assignment) on the Common Application since the collection of that data in the Fall semester of 2017. As reporting and data collection of demographics continue to transition at the institutional level, these metric categories will begin to tell a story as to who is counted and how at the university. Despite visible gaps in demographic representation of gender beyond male and Female, CMU created a space of affirmation for gender identity through their Title IX Initiatives office, specifically highlighting the inclusion of gender identity in the university's Statement of Assurance and through processes for preferred names, gender inclusive restroom locations, and highlighting where to find all-gender facilities throughout the campus infrastructure (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-h). The institution prides itself on creativity and innovation within the fields of science and technology and attracts some of the best talent at all levels from all over the world, while touting diversity and inclusion as some of their core values.

### **1.3 Significance of Inquiry**

Through the ongoing examination of existing research and literature on the TGNC student experiences within higher education, I have found that “minimal research dedicated to the study of the Transgender college student population reflects the degree to which deeply ingrained assumptions of a binary gender system shape both educational research and practice” (Dugan et al., 2012, p. 719). Given the low frequency of research being conducted with TGNC populations, it is imperative that practitioners like myself continue to capture data to humanize the ways in which TGNC populations exist and experience the world—in this context, within higher education. As quoted earlier in this chapter, Effrig and colleagues (2011) describe Transgender students’ fears and negative perceptions of campus. Given the demographics and metrics highlighted previously, a binary culture and structure is ingrained at CMU. Therefore, practitioners within the field of higher education must interrogate infrastructures that do not keep pace with the ways in which TGNC student populations seek to exist in on college campuses. Lange, Duran, and Jackson (2019) said it best, sharing,

Practitioners can help students make meaning of the ways their identities and experiences are shaped by heterosexism, cissexism, and white supremacy, among other forms of oppression. Rather than their identities being seen by themselves and by educators as disruptions, this knowledge becomes a form of empowerment to resist narratives that locate problems within individual actors. (p. 523)

These findings served as additional motivation for my inquiry, so that I can provide intentional evidence for how current TGNC students are experiencing barriers in the form of policies, structures, climate, and perceptions of their gender identity within higher education. As a result, the evidence collected in this study provided an opportunity for the data to serve as a

measure of accountability and should spark a greater sense of responsibility from the administration at all levels to address the outcomes of my study.

This inquiry also gives insight and the necessary attention to the TGNC experience within the college context. Because I am not a Transgender scholar myself, far too often “the focus on [Transgender] collegians is often taken up by scholars who identify as [Transgender] themselves, leading to the question of how institutional actors—[Transgender] or not—attend to this community of students” (Lange et al., 2019, p. 517). To date, there is no existing data at CMU that has given voice and visibility specific to TGNC populations alone or that acknowledges the ways in which TGNC students (as well as staff and faculty) experience the various campus infrastructures and climate. Therefore, students, staff, and faculty at every level of the institution will benefit from this inquiry, with the TGNC populations at CMU likely the greatest benefactors. As a non-TGNC researcher, it is my duty and responsibility to use my privilege in assisting to provide a platform for the truth surrounding TGNC experiences to be spoken within the context of higher education (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). Therefore, current TGNC students, staff, and faculty at CMU will be the primary stakeholders for whom this research has the greatest potential for improving their on-campus experiences.

### **1.3.1 Delimitations of Study**

There were several delimitations within this inquiry. This inquiry does not address the many intersections (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) that exist among the TGNC populations. Due to time constraints, this study also did not thoroughly explore the lived experiences of TGNC people who are employed as faculty or staff at CMU, despite their participation in the interview process. While themes surrounding institutional constructs and

potential barriers were revealed through the interview protocol, these themes were not fully examined or critiqued as a result of the student-focused inquiry, methods, and approach.

## **1.4 Conclusion**

Gender, a social construct, manifests in various ways throughout society. Communities that are most impacted by this construct include but are not limited to individuals who identify under the TGNC umbrella. Higher education – one of many prominent structures throughout society – is a space where TGNC populations frequently experience some of the most overt obstacles to their existence. Navigating physical and social spaces on college campuses is a top issue being addressed in research around TGNC populations. CMU, a top research institution, is not unique in the challenges and obstacles it poses to the TGNC communities. To date, there is no known or existing infrastructure that would indicate that CMU is a place where gender can exist beyond a binary framing (Female/male). In an effort to understand the experiences of those individuals who identify as TGNC in such constrained environments, interviews were conducted with students, staff, and faculty currently affiliated with the institution. The hopes of this inquiry were to gain a fuller understanding of existing perceptions that exist among TGNC students, faculty, and staff with regards to the on-campus experiences of CMU students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. By creating a targeted line of inquiry surrounding the TGNC experiences at CMU, the desired outcome for this study was to develop long-term strategies for creating an inclusive, equitable, and accessible campus climate for TGNC community members at CMU.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

For at least a decade now, gender has become a more visible concept within postsecondary education; scholars like Nicolazzo (2016) and Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet (2012), to name a few, have specifically put the spotlight on Transgender students within the context of higher education. Despite a slowly growing base of research centering the Transgender community within educational spaces, “the volume of scholarship regarding [Transgender] college students pales in comparison to many other research topics in higher education” (Nicolazzo et al., 2017, p. 40). This also holds true for Gender-nonconforming populations and the ways in which their experiences uniquely parallel those of the Transgender community in higher education, specifically when Transgender individuals align their gender identity and expression beyond binary and/or traditional masculine/feminine constructs. Some would find it even more disconcerting to know that research being conducted within these populations are still predominantly conducted at the hands of individuals who do not share lived experiences that connect them personally to the TGNC community beyond allyship (Nicolazzo et al., 2017). This factor should not be interpreted as a barrier for cisgender researchers interested in accessing this space, but rather as a point of accountability in working with and alongside individuals in the TGNC community in an attempt to create visibility, resistance, validation, and liberation from oppressive systems by highlighting lived experiences of the Transgender community within higher education.

The complexity and topic of gender on college campuses is one that can no longer be ignored. According to Dugan et al., (2012), “the [T]ransgender college student population is often a marginalized or outright neglected voice in the broader higher education and student affairs literature” (p. 734). While many can speculate as to why this is, Dugan et al. (2012) additionally



emphasized that “the minimal research dedicated to the study of the Transgender college student population reflects the degree to which deeply ingrained assumptions of a binary gender system shape both educational research and practice” (p. 719). Just as there is a shared sentiment among scholars and researchers conducting Transgender-specific studies, there is also “only a small fraction of literature [describing] the lives of nonbinary [T]ransgender collegians” (Lange et al., 2019, p. 519). These factors are what served as additional motivation for my inquiry question.

In this literature review, I highlight three main themes related to the TGNC population within the context of higher education. First, I provide definitions that enhance an understanding of the TGNC population and serve as a guide to this inquiry. Second, I focus on the experiences of the TGNC within higher education, highlighting how genderism intersects and permeates higher education and emphasizing the ways that gender is binarily reinforced through various structures within postsecondary education. Third, I highlight available and accessible resources intended to affirm the existence of TGNC students on college campuses, specifically calling attention to the inaccessibility for both undergraduate and graduate TGNC students.

## **2.1 TGNC Terms and Concepts**

Language helps to shape our understanding of the world we live in and those around us. As a guide to this inquiry, it is important to first define terms such as, but not limited to: Transgender, transsexual, cisgender, Transphobia, the gender binary, genderism, microaggressions, and Transgender oppression. In defining these terms, I purposefully attempted to deconstruct binary systems that minoritize TGNC people and identities.

There are many terms used to describe any gender that does not align with the gender binary of Female or male. Hines (2010) provided an all-encompassing understanding of the TGNC community, highlighting that “‘Transgender’ includes gender identities that have, more traditionally, been described as ‘transsexual,’ and a diversity of genders that call into question an assumed relationship between gender identity and presentation and the ‘sexed’ body” (p. 1). However, it is important in this context to note that “[Transgender] is not synonymous with transsexual” – meaning that the Transgender umbrella encompasses an ever-growing, expansive, and continually changing population of individual identities and experiences (Nicolazzo et al., 2017, p. 21). In many studies with a specific focus on the Transgender population, researchers often use an asterisk to denote the expansion of the Transgender umbrella. To further emphasize this point, Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2017) shared that,

Trans or “[T]rans\*” with an asterisk can be used as shorthand to reflect the full spectrum but is not exclusive to: [T]ransgender, transfeminine; transmasculine; transsexual; transvestite; genderqueer; genderfluid; non-binary; genderfuck; genderless; agender; non-gendered; third gender; two-spirit; bigender; androgynous and gender-nonconforming. (p. 2)

While the intention behind using the term “Transgender” is to represent those who transcend their sex assignment at birth, understand that there is still some affinity to a desired gender identification and/or label for individuals who identify under this umbrella term. To be inclusive of those individuals who do not conform to a “gendered” label, I included gender-nonconforming identification for those who do not assimilate or conform to the traditional notions and expectations of gender in the various ways in which we, as humans, experience gender — socially, culturally, and structurally — day to day.

Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and Black (2019) affirmed that the existing diversity within the TGNC community is of significant importance to note and specifically highlight that individuals who identify with the Transgender community can rest between an additional embedded spectrum—on one end, wanting to quietly exist within the socially constructed gender norms and standards within a U.S. context, and on the other end, those wanting to let their identity of TGNC be known, often as an act of resistance and challenge to the gender binary. Many who have even a slight awareness of the Transgender community can interpret their decisions of visibility and “outness” as a measure of safety and identity formation, given the culture and continuous rise in homicides, specifically within the Black TGNC community (Brooks, 2016). When fear and safety are in alignment with a Transgender identity and/or experience, the root cause of that fear and safety can be directly connected with a term known as “Transphobia.” Transphobia, as defined by Acker (2017), “is the common term to describe the fear, discomfort, and prejudicial attitudes that people have toward Transgender people” (p. 2012). Some studies have reflected the insufficient amount of existing data with a focus on the LGBTQ+ community at large, and similar patterns for the TGNC communities are reflected below.

Lange and colleagues (Lange et al., 2019) critiqued the state of research being conducted with LGBT and Queer populations within the context of higher education, asking a very important question: “what does it mean for a [Transgender] tipping point to be framed in relationship to visibility when visibility often results in violence and death?” (p. 512). Because we live in a culture and society where a binary gender of Female or male is perceived, and is often claimed as the only way to exist, “the experiences and perceptions of [T]ransgender individuals fundamentally challenge society’s normative beliefs and theoretical ideas about the nature of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation” (Nagoshi et al., 2012, p. 406). Another cultural assumption is that

sex assignment at birth is synonymous with gender identity. To limit misinterpretations, a common definition of gender identity is “often described as an individual’s self-defined internal sense of being male or [F]emale or an identity between or outside these two categories” (Nagoshi et al., 2012, p. 406). These two categories, Female and male, are also what are referenced as – and what is the primary context of this literature review – “the gender binary.” This gender binary is commonly based on a traditional categorization of sexed anatomy and external genitalia at birth (Nagoshi et al., 2012). “The fact that the societal definition of gender as binary leaves no space for [the] Transgender experience to be considered normal and does not reflect the lived experience[s] of gender within society is problematic and oppressive,” providing an additional layer of support and added motivation behind this inquiry (Markman, 2011, p. 317).

Individuals interface with choices and decisions surrounding gender on a daily basis. Whether it is shopping for clothes at a mall, buying a gift for a baby shower, or determining where the nearest restroom is located at the grocery store—gender and gender identity are both conscious and unconscious in our day-to-day lives. The default, as stated previously, is that gender exists only within the constructs of male and Female. Any attempts to veer from this construct are often met with resistance in the form of “genderism,” which by definition “can be enacted interpersonally and structurally, [and] is a social system undergirded by the belief that there are only two genders and forcibly labels individuals as either men or [Womxn]” (Woodford et al., 2017, p. 95). Using a mixed methods approach, Woodford et al. (2017) highlighted that the most common experiences of genderism by individuals who identify outside of this two-gender (binary; Female/male) system occur through the structural limitations of accessible and inclusive restrooms and housing on college campuses. Woodford et al. (2017) also identified these structural limitations as examples of Transgender microaggressions—defined as the subtle, overt, and covert

indignities or digs that invalidate and/or call into question one's identity/-ies and/or lived experiences. Microaggressions, as defined in this inquiry, are experienced by Transgender students "through institutional policies and practices, and social norms that maintain the male/man and Female/[Womxn] sex/gender binary" (Woodford et al., 2017, p. 95).

Throughout higher education, genderism along with cisnormativity (defined as "the perpetuation of the false belief that there are only two genders, gender is immutable, and bodies define gender"; Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Black, 2019, p. 383) are pervasive. Seelman (2014a) helped to further affirm and explain how these concepts manifest in higher education by highlighting that,

generally, these challenges reflect how the [behaviors], goals, norms, and values of higher education institutions reflect an underlying assumption or belief that people who are not Transgender or gender-nonconforming are more "normal." (p. 619)

As stated previously, unless one is paying close attention and is capable of operating outside the confines of the gender binary, it is easy to overlook this pervasiveness in which gender dictates everyday life, particularly for TGNC students on college campuses. Bell (2016) captured our attention by pointing out that,

American law presumes that all persons are born either [F]emale or male and rests a surprising number of legal entitlements on this presumption. Persons' legal rights to express their identity at work, to use public accommodations, and to retain legal parenthood status with respect to their children may all depend on whether they are Female or male. (p. 163)

This idea or practice that aligns human existence along two primary genders is perpetually reinforced through the literature that continues to support these notions within the context and practices embedded and demonstrated throughout higher education.

Regardless of where students fit along this embedded structure of gender identification, the literature continually points towards a higher education context that prevents TGNC identities from coexisting with this binary. Dirks (2016) indicated that higher education institutions perpetuate genderism and operate primarily from a victimizing perspective when they attempt to support the TGNC community. And often times, “the conflation of sexuality and gender by those on and off college campuses not only is highly reductive but also threatens to overlook the distinct experiences of [Transgender] students” (Nicolazzo et al., 2017, p. 36). While there are attempts to provide guidance away from placing individuals into “boxes,” we still know that

existing research has mainly focused on [Transgender] students with binary (male/Female) gender identities (i.e., Transgender man, Transgender [Womxn]); yet, an increasing number of young adults hold nonbinary (not male or Female) identities, including those with no gender, a gender other than man or [Womxn], or more than one gender. (Goldberg, Kunalanka, & Black, 2019, p. 384)

Literature surrounding Nonbinary gender identities and how students navigate higher education spaces is especially dearth, if not non-existent (Flint et al., 2019; Renn, 2010). Flint and colleagues (Flint et al., 2019) also used the terms “Nonbinary,” “gender-nonconforming,” and “genderqueer” to “refer to people who reject the terms Transgender and transsexual for themselves, because they think the terms are either old-fashioned or too conceptually enmeshed in the gender binary” (p. 438). This study in particular centered the experiences of this demographic, highlighting the ways in which gender-nonconforming individuals have to navigate internal and

external campus spaces and experiences of genderism—often times aligning with the Transgender-specific experiences that will be highlighted in more detail below. Despite these known complexities with regard to gender, gender identities, and the experiences reported and disclosed by TGNC student populations, higher education will continue to persist in reinforcing a binary system, thus consciously and unconsciously perpetuating Transgender oppression.

Catalano, Chase, and Griffin (2016) defined “Transgender oppression” as a system that disadvantages “people whose gender identity or expression do not conform to binary cultural norms and expectations” (p. 183). Binary cultural norms are reflective of the assumed feminine and masculine traits, behaviors and expressions affiliated with Female and male gender identities and sex assignment—a social construct in which we are socially expected to operate within. Nicolazzo et al. (2017) unpacked Transgender oppression further stating, “by using this term [Transgender oppression] as an organizing principal for understanding the social asymmetry of gender enforcement and regulation requires that [Transgender] people and their needs are acknowledged and centered in discussion” (p. 170). Therefore, practitioners and scholars must be careful in how to explore and engage in discourses around genderism, as genderism – while it is a critique of binary and normative gender constructs in a broad sense – “does not rely on or center [Transgender] people in its operation” (Nicolazzo et al., 2017, p. 10). To further emphasize the centering of Transgender oppression in this review, Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2017), emphasized that,

appreciating that cisgender [cis] or cissexual individuals whose “identity and presentation match their physical morphology and mirror normative [behavioral], cultural and psychological traits typically associated with their sex” is key to understanding the oppression of Transgender people and the benefits for cis populations. (p. 2)

Transphobia is also under-studied and under-researched, making it difficult to critically analyze the pervasiveness of its impact when fostered through policies and practices enacted by administrators, faculty, and staff whose primary purpose is to support, educate, and create inclusive environments in order to elevate student matriculation and successful completion of college and higher education (Nagoshi et al., 2008). According to Nagoshi et al. (2012), “the experiences and perceptions of Transgender individuals fundamentally challenge society’s normative beliefs and theoretical ideas about the nature of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation,” which can leave higher education administrators, staff, and faculty as the primary perpetrators of discrimination and exclusion at systemic levels (p. 406). This information can further explain and confirm why, still today, we’ve seen inconsistent implementation of education and accountability across higher education according to various studies that attempt to capture and measure the perceptions of the TGNC community at different levels.

As a result, “higher education institutions have responded to [Q]ueer and [Transgender] oppression on college campuses in varying ways, including but not limited to, creating LGBTQ+ centers or staff positions, adding sexual orientation and gender identity to nondiscrimination policies, and instituting gender-neutral housing” (Lange et al., 2019, p. 512). This approach can also be interpreted as an approach to mitigate the Transphobia that is prevalent throughout higher education as well. The question still remains: are colleges and universities doing enough?

## **2.2 TGNC Experiences on Campus**

Going to college, for some students, is an opportunity to live in their authentic identity, possibly for the first time (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017). However, many TGNC students come



face-to-face with the task of navigating oppressive campus climates. According to the 2010 National College Climate survey, “perceptions of campus climate are often tied to experiences of campus climate” (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 11). They continue to further highlight that,

There were significant differences in the rates of observations of harassment between respondents who identified within a gender binary and those who did not. Approximately two-thirds of transmasculine respondents (67%), GNC [gender-nonconforming] respondents (67%), and transfeminine respondents (63%) observed harassment, compared with 52 percent of [Womxn] and 50 percent of men. (p. 12)

Additionally, Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2017) highlighted areas within higher education where TGNC students experience the embedded structural, cultural, and policy-based gender-exclusive practices that include but are not limited to “health care; student accommodations, bathrooms and locker rooms; the collection and storage of student personal data; omissions in diversity inclusion [programs]; staff and student training and support” (pp. 2-3).

In additional to the on-campus experience, empirical research highlighted by Seelman (2014b), “indicate that a notable proportion of Transgender people who have attended higher education are not allowed to access gender-appropriate housing (19%) and/or appropriate bathroom and other facilities (23.9%) while they are students” (p. 198). For those students who do have access to such spaces, we have seen an effect in how “sex-segregated restrooms expose Transgender students to harassment, and sex-segregated housing contributes to exclusion, invisibility, and discomfort” (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Black, 2019, p. 384). It should be assumed that institutions of higher learning and college campuses are places where students should experience the fewest barriers when seeking to obtain a higher education. However, studies examining the TGNC experience on college campuses have illustrated how institutions continue

to exclude and fail to acknowledge the existence of this population, reinforcing the gender binary and placing TGNC students at risk. We see this risk demonstrated within higher education most predominately through spaces that erase, invalidate or challenge TGNC identities through segregated spaces like bathrooms, housing and locker rooms, but most evasively through unaccountable policies and procedures embedded within the operational fabrics of the institution (Seelman, 2014b). And as a result, studies began to emphasize revolving experiences of TGNC students and how they experience the climate on college campuses. In Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and Black's (2019) study, "some participants described how the institutional features of college, including policies and procedures, created a climate in which they were repeatedly reminded that they were not welcome and did not belong" (p. 388). One prominent example included the process to change a legal name to a chosen name in the university system. This same study also highlighted several student narratives that exposed the barriers and constant inconsistencies related to online infrastructures that prevented students from changing legal names or created communication barriers because name policies and procedures were non-existent (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Black, 2019). The gender assumptions under which college campuses operate pave the way for culturally ingrained and reinforced genderism, cisnormativity, and Transphobia. Results of various forms of oppression and minoritization of the TGNC populations can manifest in numerous forms of transphobic behaviors exhibited overtly and covertly by campus faculty, staff, and other students.

Despite the transphobic cultures that might exist on some college campuses, this notion of resiliency enacted by TGNC individuals can often ignite "a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy, but this effect must be interpreted in the context of the interaction between climate and relative supportiveness" (Goldberg et al., 2020, p. 14). These challenges also act as a reflection of how cisgenderism actively permeates the foundation of higher education leadership

and their approach to maintain a specific campus culture around gender consciously and unconsciously. And as stated by Marine (2017), “undeniably, senior-level executives, academic affairs personnel, and student affairs administrators within institutions of higher education must take more steps toward naming and eliminating genderist practice whenever and however necessary” (p. 227). In the study conducted by Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and Black (2019), it was commonly found that TGNC populations on college campuses experienced “misgendering by faculty [and] the experience of explaining one’s name and pronouns to faculty, who might try to use them but then give up or complain” (p. 390). Without any structural protections or measures of accountability for campus administrators and faculty, and because of the existence of “transphobic individuals, policies, and cultural norms across campuses, [Transgender] students often feel they need to be careful with whom, when, and how they disclose their [Transgender] identity” (Nicolazzo et al., 2017, p. 36).

Seelman (2016) shared that,

the NTDS [National Transgender Discrimination Survey] data indicate that a sizeable portion of Transgender people continue to face a multitude of interpersonal stressors in college, as nearly one third of this sample had experienced harassment, bullying, or physical or sexual assault by other students, and 13.8% had experienced such victimization at the hands of teachers or staff in college or graduate school. (p. 1390)

This data point is one that is reflected in much of the existing research surrounding the TGNC experiences and studies that have attempted to expose some truths within this higher education context (Dirks, 2016; Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2020; Pryor, 2015; Seelman, 2014a; 2016).

Consistent with previous research on the TGNC student populations, there have been reports that TGNC students experience frequent encounters with harassment and discrimination from peers, faculty, and staff, ultimately impacting their sense of belonging (Dugan et al., 2012). Goldberg and colleagues (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Black, 2019) further emphasized that the students in their study reported having to take “considerable time and energy to navigate the cisnormative, highly gendered, and sometimes explicitly transphobic nature of campus interactions” (p. 388). Feelings of isolation as well as campus and cultural barriers often contributed to how some TGNC students engaged around their gender identity within their campus communities. A study conducted by Goldberg et al. (2020) that centered mainly on Transgender activism and advocacy noted that students who perceived their “campus as more transphobic was also related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy, but this effect must be interpreted in the context of the interaction between climate and relative supportiveness” (p. 14). Activism can also be interpreted as a familiar symptom of isolation, especially for those who identify in the nonbinary spaces.

Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and dickey (2019) published one of the few studies that specifically highlights the experiences of individuals that specifically identify as Nonbinary. They noted that Nonbinary individuals experience distinct challenges relating to their gender expression, resulting in experiences of misgendering perpetuated by faculty, staff, and peers. Understanding the gaps that exist for graduate students with regard to support and affirming resources for TGNC individuals is still unknown, and therefore should be of particular note for future research and implications for this group. Assessment and the lack thereof leave space for higher education staff, faculty, and administration to maintain and engage in this “epistemology of ignorance” as described by Nicolazzo et al. (2017), especially with regards to the ways in which the Transgender

community experiences sexual violence on college campuses (p. 39). Therefore, students tend to be more motivated to participate in self-advocacy when there are fewer supportive structures in place around their gender identity. However, when supportive campus resources such as resource centers are in place, “most LGBTQ resources are undergraduate-centered” (Goldberg et al., 2020, p. 14).

### **2.2.1 TGNC Graduate Student Experiences**

Few studies highlighted and addressed the experiences of TGNC graduate students within the context of higher education. Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and dickey (2019) showed that TGNC graduate students face additional and unique challenges on college and university campuses. They noted that graduate students “may face unique forms of stress, due to their isolation as [Transgender] students on campus and the additional demands and workloads that they often face” (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019, p. 14). Similar to the research conducted in general on the Transgender community within higher education, this same study highlighted that there is an additional need to examine the graduate student experience, as graduate students are “understudied but important to examine given their unique social positioning in institutions of higher education” (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019, p. 38). TGNC graduate students in this study specifically made note of their experiences with advisors and supervisors, describing how advisors and supervisors were,

misgendering them even after participants oriented them to their names and pronouns. Such behaviors on the part of faculty represent a harmful form of microaggression, in that they are perpetuated by a person in power and communicate a fundamental disregard and lack of respect for participants’ gender identities. (p. 48)

As noted by Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and dickey (2019), their study is one of a few specifically focusing on TGNC graduate students since 2005. Because of the more direct experiences that graduate students tend to have with faculty, this study specifically “suggest that faculty members often lack knowledge of and sensitivity to TGNC graduate students” (p. 49). Furthermore,

the presence of TGNC faculty and staff may indirectly and directly promote TGNC graduate student engagement, retention, and success, by (a) communicating a powerful message that TGNC people are valued, and (b) providing TGNC students with individuals who can offer support and guidance related to their professional development as TGNC people. (p. 49)

Despite the lack of research with the graduate student population, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and dickey (2019) did highlight some positive impacts experienced by TGNC students – impacts that are very rarely noted in undergraduate studies on this subject. Despite experiences of being misgendered or having the wrong pronouns used by advisors and/or supervisors, participants also described that their advisors or supervisors were very engaged and accountable to their mistakes made in these instances. These behaviors, in turn, made TGNC graduate students feel affirmed in their TGNC identities and felt as though they had support structures in place that allowed for some students to “survive the stress of graduate school” (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2019, p. 47). However, due to the lack of and inconsistent TGNC research specifically assessing the educational practices, implementation, and accountability among administrators, faculty, and staff within the context of higher education, it can be assumed that there is much work to be done in this area to address the societal bias and phobias perpetuated against TGNC populations (graduate and undergraduate alike) based on societal constructs of gender and gender identity.

### **2.3 Resources for TGNC Students on College Campuses**

Renn's (2010) assessment of research surrounding LGBT identities suggests that, "political, social, and sometimes intellectual alliances of LGBT people have led to the conflation of these distinct groups in campus contexts, where they are frequently treated as a monolithic community for the purpose of providing programs and services" (p. 135). These programs and services within higher education often come in the form of LGBTQ+ Resource centers. Various iterations of resources and resource centers on college campuses are seen at both public and private institutions alike, specifically those geared towards the LGBTQ+ student populations. These support resources can range from visible physical spaces with dedicated and out LGBTQ+ staff, to student organizations and affirming online spaces where information and training tools are readily available to the campus community. However, not all colleges and universities are equipped or proactive in creating affirming spaces for all minoritized populations, especially TGNC students. Some studies, including one conducted by Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and Black (2019) indicated that,

in the absence of formal and informal sources of affirmation (e.g., Trans-affirming faculty or student groups) that may buffer against the effects of broader institutional nonsupport, [Transgender] students may experience a lessened sense of belonging on campus, rendering them vulnerable to social and academic disengagement and persuading them to leave college (p. 384).

Infrastructure on campus tends to be a good indicator of how TGNC students evaluate and assess the campus climate. Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet (2012) suggested that "enhancing perceptions of campus climate should begin with increasing the awareness of [T]ransgender students' needs as well as formal training processes that educate faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 733).

Through the centering of the tragic death of a white, cisgender, gay male (Matthew Shepard), we have seen an emergent level of responses by colleges and universities in light of more overt homophobic attitudes infiltrating campus climates since his death in 1998 (Fine, 2012). As conversations around resources and campus infrastructure continue to revolve around gendered spaces, Goldberg and colleagues (Goldberg et al., 2020) highlighted that Transgender resource centers could be a productive approach to empowering and supporting TGNC students, but the key is that “they must be funded and supported by the institution and be created by and for [Transgender] students, thus reflecting their diverse needs and experiences” (p. 16). This directive gets further emphasized by reminding us, and as demonstrated in the definition provided by Fine (2012), that LGBT resource centers are historically “space[s] devoted to the social, emotional, and developmental needs of sexual minority students and their allies” (p. 285). Flint, Kilgo, and Bennett (2019) further expanded upon this concept, stating that in a more traditional sense, LGBTQ+ resource centers tend to lack the backing of research in their attempts to fully support gender minorities. “Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) examined the tensions around [Transgender] inclusion in LGBTQ+ resource centers and found that these centers were neither serving [Transgender] students well nor recognizing the needs of [Transgender] students on campus” (Flint et al., 2019, p. 440). Dugan and colleagues’ (Dugan et al., 2012) study further highlighted that TGNC students often needed to seek supportive resources off campus, creating additional costs to the students. This significant absence in campus resources often cultivated feelings in TGNC students of isolation, as though they were not a part of the campus community at large (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Black, 2019).

I highlighted this topic to purposely bring to the forefront this notion of “access” and how access to gendered spaces on college and university campuses are particularly impactful to the



student experience. When it comes to gendered spaces, “[Transgender] people can face questioning, harassment, and denial of access from a variety of groups of people, from fellow students to staff, faculty, and campus police” (Seelman, 2016, p. 1391). This lack of access is particularly problematic in that it has been noted that “the setup of a college campus connects to the wellbeing of [Transgender] students, whether or not the campus has intended to actively deny the population access to campus spaces” (Seelman, 2016, p. 1396).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This review of research that centers TGNC student populations within the context of higher education revealed that the research itself is still scarce. Additionally, as noted by Nicolazzo et al. (2017),

most of the scant amount of scholarship on [Transgender] college students in higher education and student affairs is nonempirical and/or centers on deficiency discourse that situates [Transgender] individuals as victims of violence, harm, harassment, ostracism, and/or performing worse than their cisgender peers across various measures and indicators. (p. 20)

Research about the TGNC community that is available indicated a number of challenges faced within higher education settings, ranging to competency, understanding and depth of definitions associated with the TGNC population, TGNC experiences within higher education, and available resources for TGNC student populations (both undergraduate and graduate; Seelman, 2014a). However, as the visibility of the TGNC population continues to grow, it is more important

than ever to bring this topic to the forefront of research and literature within the context of higher education.

### **3.0 Inquiry Methodology**

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore how TGNC students, faculty, and staff perceive the student experiences at CMU. Given my professional experiences working with the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) populations, the goal of this inquiry specifically focused on the TGNC population to affirm the existence of, to give visibility to, and to better understand how graduate and undergraduate students are experiencing life on campus. Given the lack of research and guidance for TGNC students within the context of higher education (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017), I explored, through one-on-one virtual interviews, the following inquiry question: What are the perceptions held by students, staff, and faculty who self-disclose and/or self-identify as TGNC of the student experiences of current TGNC undergraduate and graduate students at Carnegie Mellon University??

### **3.1 Inquiry Setting**

CMU was established in 1912 by Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie. At that time, CMU was known as Carnegie Institute of Technology and was only accessible to white, male students. Over 60 years later in 1973, Carnegie Institute of Technology, also known as “Carnegie Tech,” opened its classrooms and dorms to Womxn (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-i). The year 2017 was the first in Carnegie Mellon’s history where admissions expanded its enrollment data to include options for students to self-report a gender identity beyond birth-sex. Since that option was granted, about 1% of students who had applied were Nonbinary. Furthermore, more than

6,400 of the total undergraduate and graduate student population of over 14,000 were Female, making CMU's total Female enrollment nearly half of its total student population. As the pace of advances in technology and science escalated from 1948 to 1986, Carnegie Tech underwent several transitions and additions to the academic offerings: the Graduate School of Industrial Administration, later named the David A. Tepper School of Business; the School of Urban and Public Affairs, today known as the H. John Heinz College; and the School of Computer Science, led by Alan Newell and Herbert Simon.

In the late 1960s, Carnegie Tech began the process of merging with a local science research center known as the Mellon Institute, which is how it established the name of Carnegie Mellon University (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-i). Over the years, CMU has expanded its brand and reputation globally through the establishment and creation of programs spanning its reach from the United States to Africa, Australia, and the Middle East. Today, the CMU Pittsburgh campus is home to more than 1,300+ faculty, domestic and international, of whom 58 have been identified as racially minoritized (Carnegie Mellon University, 2018). As one explores the contents of CMU's websites, there will be a plethora of Scottish heritage ingrained in the CMU culture through campus traditions like Kiltie Band, the Scottie Dog mascot, and tartan (plaid) as the official University colors.

Looking specifically at the history of diversity at CMU, "Andrew Carnegie was concerned with one main group of students for the school to serve—the sons and daughters of Pittsburgh steel workers" (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-k). Over the years, diversity efforts have expanded and continued to evolve over time. In 1999, a Diversity Advisory Council (DAC) was established as a part of the university's action plan to make diversity a top priority under the leadership of then President, Jared Cohon (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-j). The DAC was charged with the goal

of addressing three areas: “the campus climate, underrepresentation of Females and certain races, and community consciousness” (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-j). This foundational work that began in the early 2000s is reflected in the work still being done today. Over the years, several campus climate studies have been conducted, specifically examining how students experience discrimination and sexual harassment. One climate study was conducted in the spring of 2016, the results of which led to a number of educational initiatives including a campus-wide offering of Bias Buster training. In 2018, CMU opened The Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion, the first iteration of its kind in campus history, offering “resources to achieve an inclusive and transformative experience for all students” such as additional networks of support to historically minoritized student populations and first-generation college students (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-a). The space serves as a hub to the campus community to dialogue and engage critically around topics and experiences related to diversity and inclusion, with the intent for intersections to meet at a central location. However, it is still unknown whether this design and infrastructure are having the transformative impact as intended, particularly for the LGBTQ+ student populations at CMU.

The subtle notion of and reinforcement of the gender binary is very evident in the historical foundations of the institution. As stated previously, since the fall of 2017, the institution has begun to collect both sex-assignment at birth and current gender identity on the Common Application. According to fall 2019 enrollment by gender rates for First-Year students, there were a reported 11 Nonbinary students and 3 Transgender students enrolled in the class of 2023+ (Carnegie Mellon University, 2019). However, CMU does not collect sexual orientation demographic information for any population of students, staff, or faculty. As early as 2016, CMU began a trail of evidence that confirmed the existence of various LGBTQ+ student populations through initiating various

campus climate studies that explicitly began soliciting demographic information from participating respondents. According to Sutkus in a Spring 2016 Discriminatory and Sexual Harassment Study conducted by CMU's Institutional Research and Analysis department "approximately five percent of undergraduates and four percent of graduate students reported their gender identity was completely or partially different from their biological or birth sex" (p. 22). A campus climate and inclusion study conducted in Fall of 2018 at CMU also revealed that "LGBQ, Transgender, and Non-binary identifying students were largely neutral on their views about CMU as culturally relevant" (Gilbride-Brown et al., 2019, p. 3).

CMU does not have a specific program or any outward-facing initiatives that would indicate or provide a platform for TGNC visibility, let alone resources and measures of accountability for TGNC inclusive infrastructures embedded throughout various levels of the institution. Given this evidence and studies being conducted at the institutional level, it appears that CMU is building a basis for building resources and support structures where there appear to be few in place, particularly for TGNC student populations at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. My hope for this study was to create an opportunity for further examination of how to make some realistic, equitable, and inclusive campus culture shifts surrounding the TGNC communities that exist at CMU.

### **3.1.1 Epistemology**

As a researcher, it is my responsibility to use my spaces of privilege and access to create pathways for justice, highlight inequities within systems, and work in partnership with members of the TGNC communities to amplify the visibility and voices of those who share in and experience the minoritization of their socialized identities. I believe that in order to break down systems,

evidence in the form of voices, narratives, and data that can speak directly to ingrained oppression within contexts that many minoritized populations occupy, is the steppingstone to dismantling those systems. My personal perspective is that it would be unethical to situate and position myself to speak on behalf of someone else's experience. As a researcher and someone who is committed to doing social justice work both personally and professionally, I feel as though I have an ethical duty to my TGNC peers, colleagues, students, family members, and friends to create a pathway for their narratives and experiences to be shared, especially within the higher education context. Given the context of exploring gender identities as well as my desire to help facilitate change through the "production of knowledge" specific to TGNC student experiences within my place of practice, using these qualitative methods is in alignment with the proposed outcome of my study (Mertens, 2015, p. 251).

### **3.1.2 Reflexivity**

As a Black, Queer, masculine-expressing cisgender Womxn, I am no stranger to the psychological, mental, and emotional oppressive trauma one might endure, directly and indirectly, in a society that actively reminds you of your lack of privilege and belonging. Growing up in the Midwest, in a working-class household and a predominantly Black suburban neighborhood is what shaped my foundational roots and values system. My mother was 15 years old when she had me, so my great-grandmother took me in during my primary and secondary years. I was taught to respect my elders and work hard for everything I had hoped to earn in this life. Independence was an important value instilled in me at an early age and is what ultimately allowed me to venture off on my own after graduating from high school. At that time, no one in my household had ever attended college, which categorized me as a first-generation (first in the family) status entering

college. Having minimal resources, experiences, and capital to fall back on, I was often left to figure out how to navigate college on my own. Between trips back and forth to campus over the course of four years, I learned the importance of being able to code-switch to match the expectations of my environment; this became a useful tool and ultimately helped me to gain access to spaces that I am not sure I would have accessed otherwise.

It was these small experiences of adaptation that shaped my path through higher education, and what ultimately led me to a career in the field. When I reflect on my experiences growing up, I find myself in moments of empathy for those who identify as TGNC, whose life is constantly built around adapting to a physical world inconsiderate of their existence and that continues to do little to validate their existence today.

While my experiences, perceived and real, with oppressive traumas that target my very humanity run parallel, my story is not a direct reflection of the ways in which TGNC individuals have to experience and navigate the world on a daily basis. However, with regard to gender, this is an area where I must remain accountable, as I do function day-to-day as a member of the dominant group: cisgender. My memberships – especially my cisgender identity – had the potential to bias participant responses. While the power dynamic is not one that would place students in a position to fear any form of retaliation for disclosing any experiences that shed a negative light on the institution, the power structure that existed within this student/staff dynamic must also be acknowledged. While I may experience various levels of microaggressions, biases, and assumptions related to my gender expression, these experiences do not allow for me to bypass or experience any less benefit from my gender privilege, both professionally and personally. As a researcher, it is especially important for me to acknowledge and hold space for the fact that I am someone seeking to collect information from a group that I am not a part of, and thus I must



consistently be reflective of how this dynamic has the potential to directly and indirectly impact the experiences of TGNC members throughout this process. Therefore it is a measure of accountability that I hold space for both my cisgender privilege as well as my privilege and access to education that gives me positionality and responsibility to work alongside and lift up TGNC voices and experiences—crafting an additional layer of information to expose various aspects of how gender beyond the binary permeates and intersects within higher education.

### **3.2 Inquiry Approach**

I conducted this qualitative research inquiry through individual 60-90-minute semi-structured interviews via Zoom videoconferencing to understand perceptions held by students, staff, and faculty regarding the experiences of TGNC students at CMU. I recruited participants for this inquiry by sending an “invitation to participate” email communication to the executive leaders of LGBTQ+ student organizations on campus at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, seeking TGNC participants with a current affiliation to CMU (see Appendix A). Given the nature of the inquiry question, designing and conducting semi-structured in-person interviews was chosen because I was interested in the perceptions held by participants and “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning [TGNC] attribute to their experiences” at CMU (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 4).

Applying the guidance of Merriam and Tisdell (2016) for qualitative researchers, I moved forward understanding the importance of examining the experiences of TGNC populations in the settings that are most natural for what I was aiming to achieve through my inquiry question. In order to recruit participants for this study, executive student organization leaders sent a minimum

of two email invitations to their distribution lists throughout the month of March 2020. Participants then opted-in to the study through the completion of the Participation Information form (see Appendix B). Informed consent, meeting the expectations of both the University of Pittsburgh and CMU IRB guidelines, was then obtained at the onset of each individual interview once a date and time had been set according to participant schedules and availability.

### **3.2.1 Data Source**

The primary data source for this basic qualitative inquiry was semi-structured interviews with human participants 18 years and older who self-identified as members of a TGNC community, and who had a current affiliation as a student, staff, or faculty member at CMU (see Appendices A, B, & C). Given the open-ended nature of my inquiry question as well as the detailed information I was seeking to collect specific to navigating the various infrastructures of campus (e.g., housing and/or bathrooms), as well as peer/faculty/staff interactions, resources, and support structures intended for TGNC students at CMU, semi-structured interviews were the best option for data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews can be particularly useful when participants cannot be observed in their day-to-day campus experiences and interactions with members of the campus community (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An additional advantage to qualitative interviews, highlighted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), was the ability to obtain the historical context of experiences while also maintaining a level of control over the types of questioning in which participants were engaged throughout the interview process.

### 3.2.2 Data Analysis

In total, 429 minutes were spent conducting interviews, with an average time of 53.63 minutes spent per participant. Each interview was automatically transcribed via Zoom's embedded recording feature; in conjunction, Otter.io was used as a supplemental transcription tool to capture accuracy of verbal content. Video files were then converted to text files, where each individual recording was then reviewed and edited for accuracy before associated text files were manually uploaded into NVivo 12, a data analysis software used predominantly to code, organize, and manage data. The analysis process was informed by Saldaña (2016) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), where a combination of independent open, in vivo and descriptive coding was used. In vivo coding, specifically, is often used to "keep the data rooted in the participants' own language" which allows for the experiences being shared to maintain a significant level of genuine authenticity (Saldaña, 2016, p. 8). These coding methods helped to identify major themes across student populations that targeted the inquiry question.

The first cycle of open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) revealed an initial set of codes that were established with a direct link to the themes embedded in the interview protocol. The second cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2016) then revealed several categories and sub-categories that helped to highlight prominent themes and an additional level of depth that facilitated greater insight into the proposed inquiry question. Across student-participant interviews, I made note of topics, words, and experiences that gave roots to the proposed themes. The faculty and staff data was then compared to the themes revealed from the student experiences to further reinforce content being shared from the student perspectives, which solidified themes, shared in detail below.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), when collecting qualitative data, "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process," emphasizing that the process of analysis should be

conducted early (p. 195). To avoid delays and prevent data collection traps, interview content was analyzed before the onset of the next interview – beginning the process of pulling out early-detected themes that arose and were comparable to existing literature reviewed throughout the process of this study. When new or repetitive themes emerged, I used open coding to add additional context to any future interviews with participants. Another coding approach that was utilized throughout the analysis process was descriptive coding. According to Saldaña (2016), “descriptive coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data” especially interview transcripts (p. 102).

Each step of analysis was documented thoroughly, simultaneously retaining an original copy of the original raw data in order to maintain the integrity and consistency of the project and data being collected. This process proceeded forward at a consistent rate until I depleted the amount of allotted time to collect data, which was in part informed by my committee and advisor. Given the personal nature of my inquiry, anonymity and confidentiality were of utmost importance. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used to conceal participant identities, and the original raw data was kept in password-protected Microsoft Word and Excel documents. Representation of data, themes, and findings are presented in the next chapter.

### **3.2.3 Interview Summary**

The process for conducting interviews was initiated through the direct outreach to student leaders of both graduate and undergraduate LGBTQ+ student organizations. The student leaders then disseminated the IRB-approved recruitment script to their organizational listservs, where interested participants were directed to connect directly with me through the contact information provided in the scripted message. Once participants shared their interest in participating in the

study, individual invitation emails were then sent to participants individually, inquiring about their availability for 90-minute time blocks provided with the range of Sunday – Saturday 9am -8pm ET. Once participants responded via email with their availability and preferences, Zoom meeting invitation links were then emailed to each individual participant, inclusive of a designated password to enter the Zoom meeting space. An email reminder was sent one day prior to the scheduled interview. When participants entered the virtual meeting space, a consent script was read and acknowledged prior to beginning the recording, at which point additional demographic information was then collected. The same semi-structured interview script was used for each interview participant. The interviews were designed to identify themes surrounding the perceptions of TGNC experiences of graduate and undergraduate students attending Carnegie Mellon University. These perceptions and experiences were captured from TGNC-identified students, staff, and faculty. The primary focus of the inquiry centered directly on the student experiences; however, the staff and faculty participants who opted to participate in the interview process corroborated many of the student experiences through sharing their own TGNC experiences on campus as members of the CMU community. Their participation further underscored the need for additional studies of this nature that specifically seek to capture TGNC staff and faculty experiences in higher education in the future.

### **3.2.4 Sample**

Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet (2012) highlighted throughout their study that because there is a modicum of research dedicated towards the TGNC populations, there is an ingrained assumption that the gender binary permeates and is a direct reflection of how deeply this gender construct influences and shapes both educational and research practices. As a researcher, this

inquiry was my attempt to challenge the ingrained gender structures within higher education through the direct conduction of the proposed inquiry. Therefore, individual self-identified TGNC students, staff, and faculty of CMU were the primary participants for this inquiry, contributing their narratives, perceptions, and experiences to affirm and formally disclose themes surrounding on-campus experiences. I recruited participants directly from the following student groups: PRISM, the undergraduate LGBTQ+ student organization; CMQ+, the graduate student LGBTQ+ organization; and TINA (Transgender, Intersex Nonbinary Alliance), a TGNC-led group for CMU-affiliated persons who identify under the Transgender umbrella.

In total, eight interviews were conducted using the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Of the eight total participants, four were graduate students and two were undergraduate students – all of whom were enrolled at Carnegie Mellon University at the time the interviews were conducted. In addition to the student data collected, current faculty and staff members ( $n = 2$ ) participated in the interview process to reinforce themes that were derived from the student data collected (see Table 1). All participants ( $N = 8$ ) self-disclosed a gender identity within the Transgender and Gender-nonconforming (TGNC) parameters of the study. All student participants across undergraduate and graduate levels self-disclosed and confirmed that they were current students across various academic programs. The student participants ( $n = 6$ ), participants self-identified a race/ethnicity as white ( $n = 2$ ), mixed race (white/Asian;  $n = 1$ ), Nigerian American ( $n = 1$ ), Southeast Asian/Vietnamese international student ( $n = 1$ ), and Asian ( $n = 1$ ). While a majority of the student participants identified as Nonbinary ( $n = 4$ ), one student self-identified as Agender and one student self-identified as Female. While both non-student participants ( $n = 2$ ) self-disclosed a race/ethnicity as white, one self-identified their gender identity as Nonbinary and one self-identified their gender identity as Trans-masculine. To conceal identities and increase the

anonymity of lived experiences, all participant names and any other identifiable information were removed. Only pseudonyms were used throughout the findings of this study. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information after consent was given and once the interview recording feature was initiated (see Appendix C).

**Table 1 TGNC Participants by CMU Affiliation, Gender Identity, Pronouns, and Race (N=8)**

<b>CMU Affiliation</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>International Student</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Undergraduate Student	Alex	They/Them	No	Nonbinary/Genderqueer/ Genderfuck	white/caucasian (Northern European)
Undergraduate Student	Baker	They/Them	No	Nonbinary	white/Asian
Graduate Student	Charlie	She/Her, They/Them	Yes	Nonbinary	Southeast Asian, Vietnamese
Graduate Student	Denver	They/Them	No	Agender	white
Graduate Student	Emerson	She/Her	No	Female	Nigerian American
Graduate Student	Harley	They/Them	No	Nonbinary	Asian
Faculty	Finley	They/Them	No	Nonbinary	white
Staff	Glenn	He/Him	No	Trans-masculine	white



### **3.2.5 Limitations**

There are several limitations to basic qualitative inquiries. The first limitation is that the approach heavily relied, in part, on recruitment of participants through the primary channels of email communication and student organization listservs that targeted the broader LGBTQ+ student population at CMU. This approach limited the scope to only those TGNC students who participated in LGBTQ+ student organizations on campus, severely limiting the possible reach of participants. My positionality at the institution limited my access to demographic information of current students; access to this information would have offered the potential to enhance and increase the overall accuracy of demographic information of my place of practice. Lastly, this study was initiated in the midst of an international pandemic, forcing in-person interviews to instead take place virtually, which reduced the possibility of empathic exchange throughout the interview process and possibly created additional conversation barriers given the nature of the virtual platform.

## **3.3 Conclusion**

Interviews were conducted with six TGNC undergraduate ( $n = 2$ ) and graduate ( $n = 4$ ) students as well as two TGNC faculty/staff with a current affiliation with CMU; each participant provided their perceived and lived experiences on campus. In an effort to understand the experiences of those individuals who identify as TGNC, interviews were conducted. The approach to investigating the inquiry question was created to target and highlight imperative themes that

would lead to strategies for long-term inclusive, equitable, and accessible practices for members of the TGNC communities at CMU. Participants in this study helped to inform the recommendations for a more intentionally TGNC-inclusive campus and climate at CMU (see Chapter 5).

## 4.0 Findings

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore student, staff, and faculty perceptions of the TGNC student experiences within higher education at CMU. Given my professional experiences working with the LGBTQ+ populations, the goal of this inquiry was to specifically focus on the TGNC populations to affirm the existence of, give visibility to, and better understand how students within these populations are experiencing life at CMU. Data analysis revealed three main themes: navigating on-campus infrastructure; negative experiences on campus; and a labor of love: TGNC-self advocacy.

First, I want to be diligent and thoughtful in acknowledging my own positionality within the inquiry process and before these findings are disseminated for public consumption. To step into this work without acknowledging that I am a cisgender researcher embarking on work in a minoritized gender space with people who hold a different construct of labor and trauma would be irresponsible of me and anyone seeking to use this research as a tool to create equitable gender spaces on college campuses and beyond. Individuals who participated in this inquiry did so with an awareness that in retelling and in many cases reliving their experiences not only served as a reminder that their human existence across various cultural, systemic, and institutional structures has been and continues to be invalidated, but also exposed and/or reinforced barriers and challenges they may continue to face throughout their academic experiences at CMU and other institutions. With this work, I encourage each of us to actively agitate systems that maintain high levels of passivity when engaging in topics of gender equity, and to fully examine and heed any call-to-action that may result from findings of this inquiry.

## **4.1 Navigating On-campus Infrastructure**

In seeking to understand the experiences of TGNC students on college campuses, the narrative often centers on physical spaces like bathrooms and housing. This was true for the eight TGNC participants of this study, especially for those participants who identified as Nonbinary. Undergraduate participants also talked about the lack of gender-inclusive housing, as it was not as salient for graduate students, faculty, and staff.

### **4.1.1 Insufficient Bathroom Facilities**

Despite “some” institutional efforts to provide gender-affirming facilities, the number of available all-gender facilities and language around restroom/bathroom usage was a subject that each participant went into the most detail when describing how this aspect of the campus infrastructure has and continued to center their gender identity and experiences on campus. When talking about bathrooms, Glenn stated that “it’s like any and every single conversation about anything Trans-related at CMU, whether it is with other Trans [folx] at CMU or people who are, you know, allies and advocates – bathrooms come up every single time.” Other participants in this study also confirmed that it is not uncommon for the perception of their TGNC experiences to revolve primarily around bathroom facilities on campus when engaging in conversations with campus administrators. These conversations typically centered around unmet needs and campus cultural perceptions regarding students’ ability to exist as TGNC individuals at CMU. While the issues within TGNC experiences tends to involve bathroom facilities, there still was a noted lack of urgency and comprehension to mitigate what TGNC participants have been communicating as a need. Finley stated,

The fact that, you know, the institution's basic architecture is so unwelcoming to me. It really colors my experience in such a way that sometimes I can't see the actual, like, love and support that I am receiving because it's so overshadowed by this, like, ignorance of my basic humanness.

As a result of the existing gap in the bathroom/restroom campus infrastructure that is lacking or in some cases non-existent, students often find themselves having to make concessions in their daily routines. For one participant, finding gender-inclusive and all-gender restroom facilities is like a "treasure hunt." Denver corroborated this sentiment in sharing,

Unfortunately, that takes more bandwidth than I'd like. It's inconvenient. I tried to use non- gendered bathrooms. There's not a lot of them. And I often have to go pretty substantially out of my way to reach one. My advisor did change one for me. He literally just changed the sign on the door and that was very helpful. So, it's nice to have a bathroom that was reasonably close by that was unisex.

Gender-inclusive bathroom facilities have been an ongoing conversation among various groups and administrators over the last several years. CMU has made some intentional efforts to transition single-stall bathroom facilities into facilities that were gender-inclusive at the request of LGBTQ+ student organization and professional staff advocacy. However, with regard to any existing gender-inclusive/single-stall restrooms that have been established on campus, they are not always conveniently located for TGNC students and are being used by the general cisgender campus population simultaneously, ultimately limiting the availability of all-gender and gender-inclusive single-stall restrooms.

One of the largest and busiest buildings on campus, the CUC [Cohen University Center], has just one single-stall bathroom [on] the 1st and 2nd floors collectively. That single

bathroom is so often used by cis and Trans/enby<sup>4</sup> people that it is hardly accessible when it's needed. The one I'm thinking about is right next to the university gym, and in a high traffic area – it's a key spot that's physically very accessible but is woefully not sufficient to serve the great need in the area. (Alex)

To help mitigate challenges faced by TGNC populations on campus, proposals and suggestions have been made regarding the limited number of non-gendered restrooms on campus at CMU. Finley, who is also a member of the TINA (Transgender, Intersex, Nonbinary Alliance) support group and is very connected to the TGNC student community, sits on the “Bathroom Committee” at CMU and made the following statement on that accord, sharing,

No one is doing anything. So it's a pressure point that people are aware of. They're not alone in feeling this way about bathroom usage and there's an opportunity to sort of take that collective frustration and raise it up. I think people know that we deserve better, Trans [folx] know that we deserve better, allies know we deserve better and that we can do more.

While bathroom availability was by far the most prominent challenge and concern revealed throughout the interview process with CMU TGNC participants, it was also very evident that there were some additional experiences attached to the bathroom subject. Several participants, prompted and unprompted, brought up examples and experiences that called into question their ability to “pass” as their desired gender identity when navigating gendered spaces on campus.

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<sup>4</sup> An *enby* is a nonbinary person. It's a phonetic pronunciation of *NB*, short for *nonbinary*, or people who do not identify their gender as male or female (Dictionary.com, n.d.).

#### 4.1.2 On-Campus Housing

Gender-inclusive housing has expanded across university and college campuses within the United States as a strategy to broaden the message of inclusivity for students who operate outside traditional spaces of gender identification and expression (Davis, 2018). For undergraduate participants in this study, housing also played a prominent role when navigating their gender on campus within their first year of college. Not yet on pace with the national trends mentioned above, CMU requires its First-Year students to choose from predominantly binary-gendered housing options. The process of navigating housing options may be the first concrete indicator to incoming First-Year TGNC students that CMU is neither structured nor prepared to navigate gender beyond an outdated binary frame (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.-f). Instead of cultivating a strong sense of inclusion, Baker shared that their on-campus housing experience left them feeling “pretty uncomfortable.” For Alex, simply finding gender-inclusive housing options proved to be an even bigger challenge.

I found a different sentence on a different site that was like “it's not an option for First-Years” and I was like this was very sad. It was just like one sentence and there's nothing, and there was no contact to point me to. There was no one to ask about it. I had no idea what was happening. And so, I was just like, “Okay.”

Alex also shared,

...I didn't really have high expectations because I didn't know what it could have been like if there had been something that was, like, fully set up and like the system itself was, like, built upon the assumption that students could be Nonbinary or Trans or just not want to live in binary separated gender spaces. Um, that would have been great. I think I would have been — I would have been in love with that.

Professional staff TGNC participants, who also engage closely with TGNC students at CMU, similarly shared, “the process for getting gender-inclusive housing is not clear, and it's not easy to find, as far as I understand. I believe in the past that it had only been available for like First-Year students” (Glenn). For Baker, after that First-Year housing experience, they simply “...decided just to live off campus to avoid this problem...but also that effectively like avoided any awkward situations for the next three years.”

Gender-inclusive housing appears to be a missed opportunity for CMU with the TGNC student populations attending the institution. Alex shared that they feel like the lack of gender-inclusive housing is “a pretty clear example of administrative violence because, it's [housing] set up from a position of power because they [administrators] are the ones who get to choose.” And while the term “violence” in this context is used more figuratively to describe systemic power structures and personal boundaries, there were many additional overt and covert experiences that continue to inform TGNC participants that the gender culture at CMU continues to leave some folx with unmet needs.

#### **4.1.3 Lack of TGNC-Centered Support at CMU**

Participants stated that they did not feel included at CMU as a result of the lack of TGNC-centered support. According to Charlie, CMU “is not a leader in this way. You know, we look at what peer institutions are doing, we could be doing so much more around Trans advocacy, representation, and support.” Participants also noted that there was a strong sense of hesitancy to engage in social issues, especially issues that would position CMU to fully address and be accountable for some of the structural and cultural barriers currently being faced by various minoritized groups, including the TGNC populations. Harley shared that,



There's no initiative from the institution to create and curate these spaces for Trans folx. And I know that part of that comes out of fear or hesitation about not wanting to step on anyone's toes and not wanting to tell Trans folx what to do. But also, then it just leaves a gap. Right. Is it your fear...is just getting in the way? Like there are ways to create these spaces or support these spaces as allies without, like, getting in the way. So that hasn't happened in my mind.

At face value, CMU does not send an overarching message that recognizes the existence of TGNC populations on their campus. Emerson confirmed this sentiment, stating,

I always look for is like consistent, present-signaling of, you know, you're safe and included and like, it's one of those things that's like it's always hard to balance, you know, and I get it where it's like there's a certain level of, like, constantly saying “we're supportive and diverse and inclusive and da da da”...and that is obnoxious especially if it's not followed up with like action...so like knowing that administration, staff and security folx are like explicitly on our side and understand why we're, you know, that we're just trying to get through our day a lot of the time, is really important.

Even despite some of the exhaustion, invalidation, and lack of structural institutional support that participants shared, there was still a strong display of pride and confidence in their choices to attend and/or remain employed at the institution, after having offered their insights for what could fill the gaps in assisting the institution in becoming more Trans-inclusive. Emerson specifically spoke to the difference that simple signage could make on campus by sharing that,

...even if it was as simple as like signage that says like, “hey, people are using the bathroom, according to their gender identity. Please respect that,” and I've seen that in a few places. I don't know if it was on campus or off campus. I've seen that somewhere

around Pittsburgh, like, that was one of the things I saw. And I was like, I felt a lot more comfortable because it was like, that signals that management or people in charge are like aware that Trans people are around and understand who Gender-nonconforming people are.

Harley, a graduate student, also made a point to emphasize that all units, inclusive of academic departments, carry a responsibility to ensure that TGNC populations have support structures in place and that faculty need to be just as engaged in the learning and education regarding gender. They stated,

It's like the academic departments, they are fully responsible for all of this as well, you know, and I think that the fact that people don't recognize it as part of and probably one of the most parts of their jobs and I think that's a great tragedy.

While the findings of this study revealed some existing gaps at CMU, there was some acknowledgement that there is some existing programmatic LGBTQ+ support through The Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion (hereafter “The Center”). For Harley, The Center serves as one of a few spaces on campus where their gender is “even recognized” and is a space where they feel “safe.” However, as stated in the name, The Center is a student-facing resource on campus that does not house Trans-specific resources. And while many students have made the assumption that the attention to their humanity is intrinsic to the name (The Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion), TGNC populations specifically express that the attention to and support for the intersections of gender are often reactionary. Harley reiterates this point by sharing, “CMU’s approach to, like, Trans inclusion feels very reactive and like, very exception-based,” which for many participants has been a great source of “frustration.” Finley, who is an advocate for The Center, stated:

I know that there's a lot of, like, care at the Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion. But it...I also feel like that organization is, like, under-supported and not as empowered as it needs to be. And I'm hoping that that shifts.

There appear to be many opportunities within The Center for students, but as an institution, the energy that has been put into developing The Center does not compensate for the significant gaps faced by faculty and staff who are also members of the TGNC community at Carnegie Mellon University. And while TGNC faculty and staff were not the focus of this study, it is equally imperative to acknowledge their experiences on campus and how they parallel those of the TGNC graduate and undergraduate students at CMU. Although participants spent a significant portion of their interviews talking about campus infrastructure with regards to restrooms and on-campus housing, it was very evident for all participants that being misgendered was a common occurrence, emphasizing the negative experiences on campus across TGNC students, staff, and faculty.

## **4.2 Negative Experiences on Campus**

While participants talked about inadequate infrastructures, they also revealed several embedded themes surrounding bathrooms and housing gaps at CMU, which were mostly negative. The themes included confronting gender expectations of the campus community when utilizing gendered bathroom spaces through enduring “stares,” and by having to be critically conscious of the concept of “passing” with regard to their gender identity; perceptions of fear and navigating feelings of safety when using gendered restrooms.

#### 4.2.1 “Passing” in Gendered Spaces

For the majority of TGNC participants, this concept of “passing” as their desired gender identification held a strong contextual affiliation with bathroom availability and access on campus, and further emphasized their experiences attempting to exist as TGNC individuals at CMU. As noted by Broussard and Warner (2018), “passing” for some individuals who identify under the TGNC umbrella means “it is possible that the degree to which Transgender individuals conform to the traditional gender roles ascribed to their gender expression or identity may affect perceivers’ attitudes toward them” (p. 410). When the concept of ‘passing’ was brought up in Finley’s interview, they shared that their “passing” experiences mostly happens in gendered spaces, like bathrooms.

I don't really pass, and I am just kind of, you know...I feel fine in spaces that are not gender assigned because there isn't that moment of like gender-checking. You know, like I can sit in a conference room and just be, you know, I can be in a grocery store. No one's going to be like, “oh, is that a boy or a girl?” but you know that question “are you a boy or girl?” is a question that I have heard throughout my life, and the bathroom is a major place for that.

Although TGNC participants were forthcoming with sharing their lived experiences surrounding the bathrooms, one of the main messages that participants wanted to send simply revolved around wanting “people to understand the ‘bathroom issue’ and the additional ‘work’ it takes being a part of the TGNC community at CMU.” Baker continued by sharing,

...for people that can use binary bathrooms, it would be nice if some people recognize that sometimes these [binary bathrooms] are really great options for Trans people, so if they don't match what they expect a person to look like in that bathroom, not giving weird looks, for example.

To further emphasize Baker's point, TGNC individuals should not be limited to using only all-gender restrooms on campus, regardless of their ability to "pass" as the assigned gender of a given space. However, for some participants and similar to discussions that centered on passing, gendered restrooms are oftentimes spaces where some participants found restrooms to be equally a space where their gender holds validity. That same validity can become null and void given the slow shift in campus culture and engagement with gender beyond the binary. According to Harley, "I guess I don't want people to see me and then be like 'oh, their gender is not real because they're using...they're in a space that's labeled for Womxn.'" Therefore, the lack of action, particularly as it pertains to fundamental human needs, can exacerbate fears both perceived and real as well as safety concerns surrounding the use of gendered restrooms on campus.

#### **4.2.2 Safety Concerns within Gendered Spaces**

For some participants, being conscious of outward appearance is one way to increase their sense of safety when navigating campus and gendered spaces. For Emerson, a Female-identified person, gender presentation is especially important considering that some of her physical attributes could align or socialize her to a more masculine gender identification.

So, there's a degree of relative safety, but there's always, you know, a degree of exactly where I am exactly, how I'm dressed that day, you know, if I have a wig on, have my make-up on. You know, when I am in a dress, like, I feel a little bit more comfortable. But if I'm just going to the gym in some leggings and a shirt, I don't try and risk it for lack of a better word. (Emerson)

Despite some participants like Emerson, who feels "generally comfortable using the Womxn's restroom," most participants, especially Nonbinary individuals, are often uncomfortable

using gendered restrooms, as fears and perceptions of safety develop into prominent themes specifically within the context of bathrooms at CMU. For Finley, “the bathroom has never felt safe to me. And then like the question of ‘which bathroom I should use?’ has always given me a lot of anxiety.” Harley, in particular, resonated with this sentiment, sharing,

I think...something that I think... always have this lingering sense of fear, I think, is that, who knows, one day I will go into a bathroom and then actually get asked to, like, leave because this is not the right bathroom for you.

The question then arises regarding how TGNC students find compromises to the lingering anxieties and fears surrounding their ability to use and exist in gendered spaces. For Emerson, there is a greater sense of safety when using the restroom in familiar places where she is known by her peers, classmates, and faculty. As my only TGNC participant who identifies as Nigerian-American, her response also gave some insight into how her gender identity also has to intersect with her race while engaging in the interview process. She explained,

That's one of the primary reasons I stay inside lab, is I know I can go to the bathroom and I know, you know, people are on the level with me, which is really, really important. Outside of that, however, I really struggled to find places where I can go to the bathroom and feel safe.

Safety within the context of restrooms is especially important to note for TGNC students of Color. Several participants made an intentional effort to talk about the experiences of TGNC students of Color, particularly in how these individuals perceive their ability to navigate campus and other gendered spaces safely at CMU. While I was not able to recruit a significant number of TGNC participants of Color, when asked specifically about how race may contribute to her

perceptions of safety when navigating gendered restrooms on campus, Emerson was able to speak to how her race and gender specifically intersect with her experiences on campus.

I guess the big thing is, like, I am afraid of other people being afraid of me and like acting accordingly to that. You know, like, I'm just trying to use the bathroom and do my business, but, like, I know I don't want to run into a situation where someone freaks out and calls security and it's a whole deal. And like even if it ends up being resolved peaceably and they feel like really apologetic, that's still like a traumatic experience.

There were two participants in this study who shared an intersectional experience regarding their gender and race, which made it clear that concerns regarding safety extend beyond the gender-specific aspects of this study. Corroborating the experiences of students on campus that specifically highlight perceptions of safety in the context of gendered restrooms, Finley shared that Womxn's and men's restrooms are "unsafe" places for them.

I avoid men's restrooms, because I do not want to invite male rage around gender and I have experienced that in the past, and that I've had experiences where I've passed as a gay man.... And then the Womxn's restroom also feels unsafe to me because I feel like if I am interpreted as male, then I am the person who could be a violent threat and that I could either be arrested.

However, for Alex, their biggest concern was not the possibility of experiencing violence in the bathrooms on CMU's campus. Instead Alex stated, "My primary concern was that they would think I'm a guy. And just stick with that and keep that impression and that label on me because now they've seen me in the male bathroom." This perception further highlights the possible gap that exists at CMU regarding a lack of engagement around gender beyond the binary as an institution, fostering narratives shared by the existing TGNC participants in this study.

Additionally, when all-gender or gender-inclusive restrooms are not available and/or conveniently located around campus to TGNC people at CMU, students find themselves negotiating possible risks and facing additional challenges when the use of binary-gendered restrooms must be considered.

If I have to use a gendered bathroom, I tried to just do it without anyone seeing me. Multiple times I have had the experience of someone, like a Womxn, walking in, seeing me, and then walking out--checking the sign and coming back. Or just giving me weird looks or something. Um, which to be honest, I find that a little validating because I'm trying not to look like a Womxn. (Baker)

As exposed in the aforementioned examples, TGNC populations at CMU confront a number of challenges when faced with the task of finding where they can safely use the bathroom. The interviews conducted revealed that there is a significant amount of energy expended on an almost daily basis for several participants when trying to find a facility that is both conveniently located and does not force individuals to confront the various layers of the campus culture that reminds the CMU TGNC community that their gender identity and possible expression is still unlearned.

#### **4.2.3 Misgendering and Pronouns**

The culture and practice of gender is embedded within a binary construct. Nicolazzo et al. (2017) reminds us that because gender is deep-seated within this binary construct, to practice gender beyond this construct is a laborious task for TGNC students within the context of higher education. Additionally, research shows that there tends to be a higher level of bias and preconception towards individuals who diverge from the expected conformity to a traditional



binary gender with respect to expression/appearance and behaviors (Broussard & Warner, 2018). Interview participants affirmed this finding through their own individual experiences being misgendered at CMU. Baker told me about one of their experiences being misgendered on campus, sharing,

Based on my appearance, people would assume I was a guy. But after I talked to them, they would immediately correct themselves and say, oh, like, “I’m so sorry ma’am,” or whatever. And so that was part of my reason for wanting to start testosterone...was to change my voice somewhat, I really just...because I didn’t want to feel like it was a giveaway.

For Alex, reflecting on several of their experiences at CMU, being misgendered can have some positive effects to their lived experience as well.

It was actually interesting that I would be more comfortable if people thought I like...misgendered me as a Womxn or as a Female person because that was at least different than what I was used to for most of my life.

While passing is the ideal for those who identify within a Transgender-binary space, the experiences of being misgendered for some of our Nonbinary, Genderqueer, and Gender-nonconforming participants can prove to be quite burdensome. Misgendering was common among all participants. The experiences shared below are just a few examples of how TGNC populations have to navigate the expenditure of energy in these moments on campus.

So usually when the misgendering happens, I kind of just like get really uncomfortable, um, like, I try to stop the interaction, but like, I don’t know, I really shouldn’t. Like, just tell them like, “Oh yeah, like, it’s they/them pronouns” but I don’t know, it’s like, I guess I kind of feel ashamed of it. And I feel uncomfortable about correcting people. And like,

and especially when people are like still confident about just labeling me with a gender, it feels really uncomfortable to be like, oh, but actually this very fundamental thing, you're wrong about that, you know. So, there have been a few cases where I've corrected people.

(Charlie)

Glenn similarly shared his own lived experiences of being misgendered while also confirming that these encounters are not limited to just students on campus.

The first two years that I was a full time staff member, they're consistently misgendering me despite no one ever having known me as anyone other than [Glenn] and knowing how to identify all the staff, so I had to persistently...I did a couple of things – I sent emails to remind people of my pronouns. I wore a pronoun button. And I think eventually, the people who really struggled with it, like it was never intentional, but they clearly weren't doing the work that they needed to improve upon the misgender issue. And so those people, like, just stopped gendering me basically, and it decreased a lot, but I still do get misgendered by staff and [university services] unintentionally. Enough that it's like commonplace for me.

As reflected in the last two examples, the misuse of pronouns has proven to be another prominent way in which our TGNC populations encounter experiences of being misgendered at CMU.

For Harley, their early encounters with pronouns began prior to the start of their academic program.

We have, like, a Programs Coordinator staff member/person who is interesting because during open house, I asked them to put my pronouns on the name tag and they did not really understand what I was asking. And so, they just said like, “no” in a really, kind of, cold way.

Stating pronouns on business cards, in emails, and on name tags are not a cultural practice at CMU. In my role as a staff member a few years ago, I specifically worked with student organizations that requested a campus-wide shift in how to use more inclusive language around gender. When including pronouns on name tags was introduced as a possible solution and entry into a gender-based culture shift, administration made claims that CMU was not “ready” for pronouns on name tags. This was in 2016. So, it came to no surprise that TGNC students were having these experiences of being misgendered and that there continues to be a lack of engagement and awareness throughout campus regarding pronoun use.

Furthermore, for some participants, support for the use and inclusion of gender pronouns is often categorized as a mixed bag.

There are some people that are very supportive. There are some people that are less so. Most people don't really understand the idea of personal pronouns and or I guess preferred pronouns. That has been frustrating. That's the main one, I think, lack of education about LGBT and identities in particular, but especially Trans identities and experiences. (Denver)

With regard to the campus culture around the use of pronouns, several participants shared that their experiences are inconsistently dependent on various populations within the campus community. And while some participants did share some positive interactions with advisors and peers, each participant encountered some form of misgendering through the misuse of their pronouns, often through general interactions on campus.

Nobody asks for each other's pronouns, that's considered weird. People tend to not respect preferred pronouns. Honestly, I would say a minority of the people I interact with respect my pronouns. My advisor does...a couple of my close friends within CMU, but not much outside of that. (Baker)

For some participants, consistently modeling the use of pronouns, in part, would be helpful in efforts to shift campus culture around gender. Alex thought “that some amount of leading by example would be helpful. So, people in power, introducing themselves with their pronouns, for example, just making that a normal thing.” This perspective encourages the institution to model the values they profess and take steps to transform the campus culture and to address how everyone at the institution shares a responsibility to engage around gender and respecting all gender identities. Sharing pronouns and implementing this gesture in daily administrative approaches could be seen as more than a mere attempt to shift campus culture and a practice of gender but could reflect as an act of solidarity with the TGNC community and especially the Nonbinary community, as interpreted by participants.

Another item that became clear beyond pronoun use is that TGNC students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels have varying but consistent experiences related to their ability to practice their gender within the higher education context of CMU. And like many institutions of higher education, CMU has demonstrated through this study that there are particular gaps within their campus infrastructure and culture that, if addressed, could minimize the challenges and barriers faced by TGNC students attending and staff/faculty employed by the institution. Despite barriers that all TGNC participants have encountered throughout their various experiences at CMU, each participant was grateful for the opportunity to inform possible changes that should be put in place to foster a more Trans-inclusive campus community for current and future TGNC populations who will matriculate throughout the institution at various levels, especially students. All in all, despite various levels of optimism, TGNC students, staff, and faculty still found themselves working together to build their own support structures and advocacy spaces, despite not having them embedded at the institutional level at CMU, revealing a final theme.

### **4.3 A Labor of Love: TGNC Self-Advocacy**

Participants revealed that the TGNC populations at CMU take on the unpaid labor and initiative to create spaces that empower and validate their existence on campus. There have been several examples where participants have indicated various moments, whether with peers or professional staff at CMU, where they have had to explain to others how to engage around their gender identity. Baker explains how they have “been trying to have more conversations with friends about gender-related topics, just hopeful to try to get them to understand more.” For TGNC students especially, the labor of educating others on your existence and gender identity can be exhausting. This sentiment holds true for Baker, as they explained their experience: “I guess the fact that it's so much extra work to all this... having to come out, come out to people and correct pronouns and stuff.” Overall, participants reported that educating others on gender-related issues is an all too common pattern.

In addition to having to navigate educating others on their identity, TGNC participants also spend a lot of time advocating for changes to campus infrastructure, and feel that if it were not for TGNC community members doing the work on the ground, their concerns would likely not be getting the current level of attention or momentum as changes begin to happen in the future. For example, the insufficient number of all-gender bathrooms on campus was an issue ignited by members of the TGNC community and continues to be spearheaded by those most impacted by this insufficiency. Finley corroborated this sentiment, sharing that there are several issues that are embedded in the bathroom conversations happening on campus, noting that there is the perception – based on various levels of inconsistent engagement, lack of communication and transparency – that these issues are not being taken seriously by individuals who hold the power to create the structural changes at CMU, stating that there should be more initiative taken up:

About where these restrooms are and that information was like community-driven, derived from people who have been looking for these restrooms and not actually supported by or collected by campus design, who should really know where their facilities are.

Aside from TGNC populations informing and spearheading the processes for structural changes to be made on campus, there was also an element of thoughtful and intentional TGNC-specific support participants reported as missing from their experiences on campus. When given the opportunity for TGNC participants to discuss campus resources specific to their gender identification and needs, some participants listed individual relationships with advisors while others highlighted the organization of the TINA (Transgender, Intersex, Nonbinary Alliance) support group. When describing what resources he uses, Glenn made a point to emphasize that while he is utilizing this support group, he “helped to create that and so....” No other TGNC-specific resources have been prioritized or created at the institutional level at CMU, therefore it is important to know that TINA is TGNC-led. Finley gave some additional context as to the purpose of this group:

...it arose out of the need for a space basically to exist for people to come together. So, for staff and faculty, you know, there have been sort of the, the different working groups that have existed over time. But besides that, like specific Trans-oriented resources have not existed until we got TINA. And again, a Trans-led initiative.

Understandably so, there appears to be various levels of disappointment among TGNC participants with regard to having an affiliation with an institution that is persistent in their claims of inclusion yet lacks the initiative, prioritization, and responsibility to the TGNC populations that exist at CMU. To the TGNC community at CMU, the institution oftentimes sends a very clear message that their existence and contributions will not be recognized or prioritized unless this

work is initiated by its own community members. Glenn further corroborated this sentiment, sharing,

I would say that there is very little information, very little clear information on seeing us on websites anywhere or any senior websites about Trans-related resources, except for on [a University] website because I put that content together.

What some professional staff on campus have a hard time grappling with is the fact that support for TGNC, in addition to LGBTQ+, students has been woefully insufficient. PRISM, the LGBTQ+ undergraduate student organization at CMU, has been predominantly self-sustaining over the last couple of years due to several staffing transitions within a short period of time. Throughout that transition period, LGBTQ+ undergraduate students at CMU have run their organization and programs without clear or consistent advising from professional staff. Alex stated that “PRISM has a, you know, its gender support group...all that student-led and run” and has been in place since 2016, prior to my departure from the LGBTQ+ role within Student Affairs. Today, Finley is still sharing that these students have continued to face challenges without proper support, specifically TGNC undergraduate students over the course of this last year.

To see that students are still scrambling to figure things out on their own and PRISM just recently made a video about their lived experiences, like housing on campus. And I'm like, wow, it's, it's been a few years now, but this has been a problem.

Self-advocacy is not a new concept for minoritized populations. It is assumed that many support spaces are built out of a demand and need – a labor of love – often presented by the intended community for which those demands or needs are designated. At CMU, those within positions of power have the opportunity to be proactive in creating and maintaining structures that support a different narrative beyond what this study has revealed. Despite having many non-

affirming gender experiences on campus, participants still remain optimistic that Carnegie Mellon University will maximize this opportunity to create a different narrative for the sake of the members who are a part of its campus community, eliminating the notion that TGNC community members have to fend for themselves as they embark on experiences as students and professional staff.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The participants in this inquiry revealed several themes relating to student, staff, and faculty perceptions of the TGNC student experience at CMU. The campus physical infrastructure is significantly insufficient for the TGNC people on campus. However, the conversation about bathrooms and housing alone were insufficient for understanding how TGNC students and affiliated members seek to exist on campus, as participants described a significant gap in the campus culture surrounding the competence of TGNC populations. The number and location of all-gender restrooms was also revealed as a significant gap that remains unresolved in terms of action plans and prioritization for creating and sustaining an inclusive climate and culture inclusive of TGNC students, staff, and faculty. This gap in particular left TGNC participants having to negotiate their own personal well-being, perceptions of safety, and convenience in order to participate in the basic human practice of using the restroom.

For undergraduate TGNC students, inconsistencies persist regarding available information for gender-inclusive housing options, support, and processes that are inclusive of Nonbinary gender identities, which has left students feeling uncomfortable living on campus. Due to the lack of cultural competence surrounding the concept of gender beyond the binary, each TGNC



participant reported having experiences of being misgendered, whether in bathroom facilities, interactions with peers, or through the neglect and/or misuse of gender pronouns performed by other students, faculty, and staff on campus. Lastly, in order for TGNC to feel supported and visible, participants often found themselves having to self-advocate and create their own communities of support in order to avoid feelings of isolation while at CMU.

## **5.0 Conclusions, Implications & Recommendations**

The goal of this inquiry was to explore student, staff, and faculty perceptions of the TGNC student experiences within higher education, and specifically at CMU. Given existing research on the TGNC experiences of students in higher education, it was important to determine how CMU as an institution might be contributing to the lived experiences of this minoritized population. In an attempt to answer the inquiry question proposed, virtual interviews were conducted over the course of a four-week period. A total of eight interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform. All participants ( $N=8$ ) self-disclosed a current gender identity within the TGNC parameters of the study and held an affiliation with CMU; four were graduate students, two were undergraduate students, one staff, and one faculty. The results of this inquiry revealed three key findings, all of which will help guide future approaches for creating TGNC-inclusive cultures and spaces at CMU.

### **5.1 Key Finding #1: From Bathrooms to More TGNC-inclusive Spaces on Campus**

The narratives of the participants in this inquiry surrounding their gender identity and experiences at CMU were centered on the physical infrastructure of campus. The binary constructs of bathrooms and housing options were especially problematic given the nature in which these spaces directly and indirectly invalidate TGNC gender identities. These spaces also burden TGNC participants with additional fears, concerns for physical and psychological safety, and accessibility – all of which are layered on top of their responsibilities as professionals and/or students at the institution. CMU is not unique in the ways in which it operationalizes gendered spaces, as “most

universities today operate based on the assumptions that gender is binary and static” (Seelman, 2014b, p. 188) despite the growing number of TGNC populations entering higher education. TGNC populations frequently experience various forms of bias on college campuses and it is of little surprise that TGNC participants in this study have revealed some of the ways in which gendered infrastructure at CMU invalidates their gender-based experiences on campus (Schneider, 2010). All participants articulated that their experiences revolving around their gender do not happen in the vacuum of bathroom spaces, and through their participation sought to critically unpack the ways in which existing binary infrastructures on campus expose them to a culture consistent with misgendering, inconvenience, and an increased potential for harm.

Although participants stated that while there are some gender-inclusive restrooms on campus, there is a need for more. It was emphasized that increasing the number of gender-inclusive restrooms on campus would not only improve their access to facilities during their daily transitions between classes and campus buildings, but would also effectively minimize the experiences of having their gender identification and expression policed in such spaces. As noted by Seelman (2014b) and affirmed by participants in this study, “people on campus are actively policing and sanctioning Trans people based on their perceived gender expression within bathrooms and other facilities and that ‘passing’ as one’s gender plays a role in whether one is challenged in such spaces” (p. 200). Most participants talked about the commonplace experience of being read as the wrong gender or being policed in binary spaces, especially Nonbinary participants, which further disaffirmed their existence and validity on campus.

Shedding light on the attempted minimizations of the TGNC experience to the sole issue of accessing bathrooms also exposed competence gaps throughout the campus community. One participant shared how city and county bathroom codes are often used as justification for why

CMU campus design does not immediately mitigate bathroom concerns presented by TGNC community members. This detached approach and lack of urgency further emphasized the competence gap among campus administrators and cisgender populations who lack awareness and the ability to critically analyze how current gendered infrastructures on campus pose real barriers, rooted in oppression, for TGNC populations seeking to exist on campus. Exposing the exclusive nature of gendered spaces on campus, particularly for TGNC community members, becomes a complex dialogue for cisgender populations who are rarely, if ever, required to attempt or expend significant levels of psychological and/or emotional energy when seeking out spaces that validate our gender identity. Acknowledging the potential and real harms that are created by gendered spaces on campus generates a real opportunity for accountability and critical dialogue among campus administrators to create and uphold critical measures of responsibility as professionals working in higher education. This process also opens up possibilities for creating TGNC-specific resources, investing in support structures, and maximizing a greater level of consistent engagement and education necessary to ensure that appropriate culture shifts highlight and include the TGNC communities at CMU.

## **5.2 Key Finding #2: Educators Lack an Understanding of the Experiences of TGNC People**

With the demand for increased visibility of TGNC identities within higher education, it has become clear that many faculty, staff, and administrators are ill-prepared to support people beyond the gender binary. As participants divulged, despite the slow trickle of additional gender-inclusive spaces that get added at CMU, there still remains an insufficient amount of education incorporated as administrators seek to address concerns presented by TGNC populations at the institution. I

agree with Seelman (2014a) who said, “even when gender-inclusive spaces exist on a campus, a significant obstacle exists in terms of educating the campus about how to use such spaces so that they do not become spaces used only by Transgender people” (p. 630). Even so, participants highlighted the dissonance experienced when disseminating information to non-TGNC people in an attempt to increase competence surrounding approaches to creating spaces rooted in the inclusion of TGNC populations. For context, cisgender people often stare and interrupt attempts made by TGNC individuals to use spaces like restrooms and locker rooms, because they do not conform to the assumed gender expression consistent with the markings for that exclusively gendered space.

As most studies do not specifically address the lack of TGNC-specific education, understanding, and behaviors perpetuated by faculty and staff on college campus, I cite Seelman (2014a) again here in recognizing that it is rare to see a high level of demonstrated competency among staff and faculty through the ways in which institutions can restructure their policies and administrative practices that are inclusive of TGNC people. Campus administrators should have a greater sense of responsibility for ensuring that all students are able to thrive at every intersection in which they exist on college campuses. But in reality, when minoritized populations – especially TGNC students – continue to experience a campus culture that is not aware of or especially educated around their existence, these actions send a very clear message that TGNC basic needs “are not an institutional priority” (Woodford et al., 2017, p. 95). One participant shared, specifically, that the lack of prioritization could be mitigated in part if faculty and staff had more education that specifically centered on TGNC identities and their experiences as TGNC individuals on campus. Understanding the experiences of TGNC populations, and the toll of Trans folx having to navigate campus in the midst of physical and/or medical transitions, is something

that is not well understood, further adding to the importance of using gender-inclusive language, as one participant put it. Seeing gender-affirming language and gender-inclusive pronoun usage in policies and texts are essential for creating inclusive perceptions for TGNC populations at CMU.

All in all, this study gives CMU an opportunity to critically engage and invest in their TGNC communities and student populations. It is to no surprise that folx within positions of power throughout CMU lack knowledge and awareness, and in general fail to understand how TGNC identities coexist within their campus climates and cultures. For cisgender populations, it is easy for us to overlook the nuances of finding a restroom that signals and affirms our gender identity or of walking into a space where we can expect people will correctly identify us by the correct pronouns. For most participants, there was a level of uncertainty regarding the knowledge base of faculty, staff, and administrators, particularly with regards to competency around gender, gender-constructs, TGNC identities, and how experiences of these communities are invalidated and negatively perpetuated at their hands. Because of the existing TGNC-competence gaps among the cisgender populations at CMU, the exacerbation of the lack of resources becomes an even more prominent finding for the TGNC community on campus across students, staff, and faculty.

### **5.3 Key Finding #3: Negative Experiences: Symptoms of TGNC Erasure**

As a Black, Queer, masculine-expressive CMU staff member of nearly five years, I am all too familiar with active systems in place that do not mirror or are reflections of me. From supervisors to management teams, one message has always been very clear—that I do not belong. One interpretation of this pervasive homogeneity is that the elevation of certain demographics situated in positions of power throughout the institution is to reinforce conscious and unconscious

attempts to erase minoritized communities and its members. When support systems and infrastructures are not intentionally put in place to reinforce the existence of TGNC populations, negative experiences can be a symptom of attempted erasure of identities. Beyond the convoluted healthcare benefits, the infrastructure for supporting TGNC staff and faculty is practically nonexistent at CMU. Parallel to the experience of TGNC undergraduate student experiences shared within this inquiry, the existing resources and infrastructure for faculty, staff, and graduate students are – at best – grassroots efforts with no substantial institutional buy-in. As mentioned in the previous chapter, TINA, a TGNC-created and -led organization, is the only known entity at CMU where TGNC populations at all levels find visibility, validation, and support and consistently expend energy in attempts to fight binary structures which, by default, erase their existence on campus.

Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and Black (2019) highlighted that “in the absence of formal and informal sources of affirmation (e.g., Trans-affirming faculty or student groups) that may buffer against the effects of broader institutional nonsupport, [T]rans students may experience a lessened sense of belonging on campus” (p. 384). Unlike many universities and colleges collectively across the U.S., CMU does not host explicit LGBTQ+ resources on campus beyond a limited number of staff-run programs, part-time embedded job functions, and a handful of student-run organizations. Being mindful of not conflating TGNC needs and support structures with those of sexual minorities, one must acknowledge the additional perceived and real gaps in infrastructures that exist for all LGBTQ+ communities at CMU and the additional impacts on TGNC individuals at the university as a result. And while interview respondents did not explicitly ask for LGBTQ+ resources broadly, they did express an explicit desire for TGNC-specific resources, education, and representation—all things that would affirm and reinforce the broad spectrum of gender identities

on campus. Goldberg et al. (2020) highlighted that resource centers could be a productive approach to creating measures of empowerment for TGNC students, emphasizing that “they must be funded and supported by the institution and be created by and for [T]rans students, thus reflecting their diverse needs and experiences” (p. 16). This prerequisite is especially true for graduate students.

Graduate students also have a very unique experience on campus compared to that of undergraduate students. Participants who identified as TGNC graduate students in this study indicated that there were several assumptions made with regards to the types of pre-existing support they receive upon entering their graduate programs. There are limited studies done specifically around the TGNC graduate student experience, as noted by Goldberg, Kunalanka, and Dickey (2019); therefore it is worth noting that while many of their experiences parallel those of undergraduate students, that graduate students – given the ways in which they are positioned at CMU and closely collaborate with faculty and staff within their academic departments – require and deserve more direct attention to how TGNC populations navigate campus at the Masters and Doctoral levels.

The messaging and/or lack of prioritization for TGNC students also extends to TGNC faculty and staff. Despite the lack of direct resources for graduate students (beyond college-based student organizations), staff, and faculty, some participants have found solace and support from individual support structures through peers and faculty advisors. This notion reinforces the labor of love discussed in the previous chapter, serving as a reminder that the work of providing support and resources for TGNC populations often rests on the shoulders of the TGNC students themselves or on TGNC faculty, staff, and allies who have to step outside of their job functions, who not only engage in unpaid labor, but take on the additional burdens of fighting against the erasure of their



gender identities they confront on a regular basis when on campus. This labor often manifests in the form of participation on advocacy committees and building and/or creating and maintaining support networks off-campus on behalf of the institution. Overall, TGNC participants – students, faculty, and staff alike – indicated that CMU could be doing much more to support and validate their existence as members of the campus community, ultimately to eliminate that conscious and unconscious systemic attempts of TGNC erasure.

## **5.4 Recommendations for Carnegie Mellon University**

According to Ahmed (2012), institutions often lack the necessary action that would otherwise demonstrate commitment, known as a “non-performative,” which fits the perceptions and experiences of the existing TGNC participant narratives. CMU, like most institutions, still predominantly operates under the assumption that gender is binary and unchanging (Seelman, 2014a). However, we can no longer deny the growing visibility of TGNC individuals on our campus, and therefore must actively heed the call to action in centering the TGNC experience and voices in our inclusion and equity efforts. The findings of this inquiry informed the following recommendations for assembling an action-based TGNC-inclusive culture on campuses.

### **5.4.1 Recommendation #1: Increase TGNC Training for All**

Administrators, staff, students, and faculty (across all levels of the institution) have a responsibility to continuously and actively engage in learning, training, and professional development that increases and maintains a high level of TGNC competence. Participants reported

and critically emphasized that TGNC-specific training opportunities did not exist on campus and should be a requirement for all of the campus community, especially administrators and faculty who interface with the campus community at all levels. These training requirements and competency measurements need to be embedded throughout job performance reviews, student evaluations, and re-appointment criteria for added layers of accountability. Trainings and learning opportunities should be accessible for students, staff, and faculty throughout every academic school year. For students, dissemination of information about TGNC-specific identities should be incorporated as early as new student orientation programs and continue throughout classroom course materials and curricula. For professional staff on campus, utilizing onboarding and maximizing pre-scheduled or routine staff and faculty meetings to incorporate opportunities for training would effectively minimize scheduling conflicts throughout the academic calendar when classes are in session and during peak programmatic times throughout the year.

In order for TGNC-specific trainings to be effective, participants emphasized that topics such as TGNC identities, gender expression, TGNC experiences, and proper pronoun use and normalization was especially critical to shifting competence, engagement, and culture on campus. In addition to the topics emphasized by participants in this study, we would be remiss not to embed layers of historical perspectives, milestone movements, and contributions made by prominent Transgender Womxn of Color that center the ways in which TGNC identities intersect with the rest of humanity. Incorporating narratives and experiences of TGNC populations, particularly within the context of higher education, will further create important dialogues around topics that center gender-based structural oppression, genderism, and various ways in which Transphobia has the potential to manifest within and throughout systems at CMU day-to-day. Education, by default, minimizes gender-based ignorance and enforces stronger measures of accountability for

faculty and staff who perpetually and actively engage in Transphobic behaviors (e.g., refusing to use individual affirming pronouns in the classroom).

Instituting various forms of training and learning opportunities that center on TGNC identities and experiences will establish intentional and active ways for the campus community to engage with gender. This transformation can be accomplished through in a variety of ways: offering virtual and in-person presentations; inviting TGNC speakers to give lectures on gender-related topics; introducing individuals using their pronouns; and/or through the active demonstration of including personal pronouns in email signatures, PowerPoint presentations, and campus-wide email communications.

#### **5.4.2 Recommendation #2: Create More TGNC Resources & Infrastructures**

Through the undergraduate admissions process that invites students to self-disclose a gender identity that lies beyond the constraints of binary-sex assignments, the institution is sending a very indirect message that it is equipped with infrastructure to meet the needs of students who choose to identify in the TGNC spaces. Despite this admissions approach, participants in this study indicated that at every level there are perceived and real gaps with regards to gender-inclusive spaces. Therefore, CMU has an opportunity to create and maintain virtual and physical infrastructures that expand and reinforce a gender culture beyond the binary, minimizing the unintended perceived and real effects of isolation and negative targeting of TGNC individuals who expand across and move within various gendered spaces. Creating a website of TGNC-specific resources that is accessible across various foundational university-wide and individual school/college platforms will be critical in creating a visible virtual culture of inclusivity and acknowledging TGNC identities as an intersection of the CMU community. Highlighting TGNC

resources that are also unique to the geographical and physical locations of campus will also be important to the larger CMU branding and cultural shifts pertaining to gender. Within these virtual spaces, there is also an opportunity and a need to adapt and adjust the ways in which names and pronouns are documented online. Shifting the culture of gender on campus should also be informed through the creation of policies and gender-inclusive procedures and processes that seek to eliminate and minimize the exposure and sharing of deadnames<sup>5</sup> and sex assignments at birth.

There are a few ways in which CMU can make good on those claims of inclusion, according to the narratives and perceptions shared among the TGNC student and professional staff populations. Acknowledging and mitigating the scarcity of all-gender restroom facilities throughout campus was a prominent experience for TGNC participants. The findings of this study revealed that TGNC community members would feel a greater sense of comfort and safety if more all-gender restrooms and gender-inclusive housing were more readily available throughout the current and future physical infrastructures of campus. Changes and updates in signage across campus was also a common theme among participants, was suggested as a possible resolution to the limited capacity of restrooms across campus. In addition to signage and increasing inclusive restroom facilities, adopting plumbing codes that allow for the expansion of and/or increase in the number of gender-inclusive restrooms throughout campus would also be a proactive approach to embedding a gender-inclusive culture at a physical-infrastructural level. Incorporate, more intentionally, gender-inclusive facilities in new construction, ultimately increasing the number of non-gendered spaces on campus. And offering accommodations for students, staff, and faculty

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<sup>5</sup> “Deadnaming occurs when someone, intentionally or not, refers to a person who is [T]ransgender by the name they used before they transitioned” (Clements, 2017, para. 3)

when accessible facilities are not available as folx are transitioning from class to class and meeting to meeting, would considerably raise the level of consciousness with regard to the insufficient number of non-gendered facilities currently on campus. Create gender-inclusive housing options for all students on campus beyond First-Year students. Make processes for opting into gender-inclusive housing more accessible and visible on housing websites, with a designated professional lead who possesses a high level of competence for understanding TGNC identities and experiences. Lastly, with regard to professional staff and support, as one participant suggested, CMU should seek to increase TGNC representation of staff, students, and faculty by intentionally implementing recruitment and retention efforts, specifically by facilitating promotional opportunities and creating pipelines for TGNC individuals to advance into and across various intersections of leadership at the institution.

#### **5.4.3 Recommendation #3: Assess the Institution's Ability to Serve TGNC Populations**

Participants in this study indicated at various levels that there is a desire and vision for CMU, as an institution, to lead in Transgender advocacy, support, and gender culture on campus among our peer institutions and beyond. In order to execute these aspirations, assessing the organization and its constituent populations on a consistent basis will serve as one way to measure the rate at which the institution is advancing its levels of TGNC competence. Investing in external organizations to conduct an assessment of physical spaces on campus, like gendered versus non-gendered restrooms and signage, would operationally enhance efforts to produce constructive outcomes for processes intended to create inclusive physical climates at CMU. These efforts are often spearheaded by TGNC students and professional staff and would efficiently remove some of

the burdens of self-advocacy carried out by our TGNC communities and anyone who requires, needs, or prefers non-gendered spaces and facilities.

Assessment will effectively ensure that the institution is actively maintaining liberated spaces throughout campus for TGNC populations from year to year, while simultaneously centering TGNC voices throughout the process. This assessment can and should be accomplished by both qualitative and quantitative methodology, and should be led by TGNC-competent researchers and practitioners. Participants in this study value action and perceive that CMU could be doing better to address the needs of their TGNC community. Facilitating consistent assessment of these efforts will be critical to the continuous engagement and create the necessary measures of accountability for dismantling systems that uphold and perpetuate oppressive gender cultures on campus. These efforts will ultimately provide additional insight and center TGNC experiences that will help inform the necessary steps and tools for creating and maintaining an action-based TGNC-inclusive campus and climate at CMU in the foreseeable future.

### **5.5 Demonstration of Scholarly Practice**

This inquiry highlighted prominent themes about the experiences of TGNC students at CMU, providing a clearer understanding of the current lived experiences of the TGNC populations on campus. Now that my inquiry has concluded and key findings have been identified, I will disseminate a PDF document, electronically outlining the findings of this study to prominent CMU administrators. I will then construct 2+-part TGNC training modules rooted in the findings and data collected from this study.

## 5.6 Implications for Research

There are several implications for research. While the sample size is small, it contributes to the limited corpus of existing literature centered on the TGNC experiences within the context of higher education. Evidenced by this study, there is a clear need for additional action-based approaches to liberating TGNC populations across the university. As noted by Seelman (2014a), not only is there a continued need for understanding and improving TGNC student experiences at the undergraduate and graduate levels, but the gap of knowledge and experiences for TGNC staff and faculty also must be addressed. This inquiry suggests that more research about the experiences of TGNC educators is needed. And while this study primarily focused on gender, it is just as important to acknowledge the intersectional aspects of the TGNC experiences within higher education, centering more explicitly on TGNC populations from the intersections of race, class, ability status, and beyond. Given the critical rate at which Black Transgender lives, specifically Black Transgender Womxn, are being murdered, it is urgent that we find ways as researchers and scholars to protect Black Transgender lives at the intersections of their existence and humanity within and beyond the context of higher education. While one participant in this study was able to speak to the nuances of having to navigate race and gender, centering specifically on how safety becomes a very real factor when her expression does not match her gender identification, most participants did not discuss their intersections of race and gender. This observation could indicate that the ways in which TGNC experiences captured in research need to critically examine the potential of how whiteness infiltrates the narratives of TGNC populations at large, and to more intentionally seek to center the voices and experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) Transgender populations. There are still significant research gaps in the TGNC experiences, overall, for students, staff, and faculty within the context of higher education.

Additional research needs to be conducted within each subset, with an additional evaluation focused on the experiences of TGNC individuals of Color.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The findings of this inquiry revealed that the TGNC populations at CMU experience and face a range of obstacles and barriers as they practice and perform their gender on campus. This inquiry is intended to encourage and promote systemic changes that center TGNC identities at CMU. Participants revealed how higher education systematically and culturally contributes to the perceived and real oppression of minoritized populations, of which CMU must take note. As practitioners, administrators, leaders, and scholars, we have a responsibility to actively seek to liberate the TGNC members of our communities from embedded oppressive cultures and structures regarding gender within our institutions. As noted by Nicolazzo et al. (2017), “everyone needs to be involved in interrogating, exposing, and resisting the insidious ways gender regulates all our lives, particularly the ways it regulates the lives of those who identify as Trans\*” (p. 139).



## **Appendix A Recruitment and Invitation to Participate Email**

**Subject:** The Transgender and Gender-nonconforming (TGNC) Student Experience at CMU:

Seeking Interview Participants

**Email/Social Media Content:**

Dear CMU Students!

My name is Ashley Grice and I am a current Doctoral Student at the University of Pittsburgh within the School of Education, with a concentration in Social and Comparative Analysis in Education. I am also a current staff member here at Carnegie Mellon University since 2015, currently working within the Alumni Association as a member of the Engagement Strategies team, with a targeted goal of engaging our Identity Networks, that consist of, The Carnegie Mellon Black Alumni Association (CMBAA), the Hispanic and Latinx Alumni Association (HLAA), and out cmuOUT (LGBTQ+) alumni network.

I'm currently seeking participants for my study, that focuses on the experiences of current TGNC graduate and undergraduate student currently attending CMU. Additional details of my study are found below.

**Purpose of this Study:** The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of current Transgender and Gender-nonconforming (TGNC) graduate and undergraduate students at Carnegie Mellon University. I am conducting this study to investigate themes and experiences that TGNC students experience within the context of higher education, given the limited empirical data that currently exists surrounding the TGNC experience on college campuses. Participation in this study is voluntary.

**Procedures:** A 60-90 minute semi-structured in-person interview will be conducted in a designated near/on-campus semi-private location of the participants directive. Interviews will be audio-recorded, used to capture experiences of the participant and to increase the accuracy of the data analysis process. No other individuals outside of the Principal Investigator (Ashley R. Grice) will be given access to audio recordings.

**Participant Requirements:** Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have a current affiliation as a graduate and/or undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University, and have a current gender identity as Transgender and/or Gender-nonconforming (TGNC) to participate in this study.

If you have an interest in participating in my study, and meet the requirements above, please reply directly to the email/s listed below to participate:

Ashley R. Grice  
[Arg122@pitt.edu](mailto:Arg122@pitt.edu) or [agrice@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:agrice@andrew.cmu.edu)

If you have any questions regarding your participation, please do not hesitate to reach out to the contact information listed above.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Best,

Ashley Grice

## Appendix B Participant Information Form

**Participant Requirements:** Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have a current affiliation as a graduate and/or undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University, and have a current gender identity as Transgender and/or Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) to participate in this study.

**Risks:** The sole purpose of the research project and your participation will not appear on your official college record. Knowing that this interview is only for research purposes and does not reflect on your college records and given the nature of the topic surrounding Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming gender identities, I hope this information will help to relieve discomfort associated with any pressure of participating in the interview. In addition, participants may discontinue their participation in the study at any time without consequences.

**Benefits:** There may be no personal benefit from your participation in the study but the knowledge received may be of value to humanity, faculty, staff, administrators working in higher education and future Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students attending colleges and universities around the world.

**Compensation & Costs:** There is no compensation for participation in this study. There will be no cost to you if you participate in this study.

**Future Use of Information:** In the future, once we have removed all identifiable information from your data (information) we may use the data for our future research studies, or we may distribute the data to other investigators for their research studies. We would do this without getting additional informed consent from you. Sharing of data with other researchers will only be done in such a manner that you will not be identified.

Are you 18 Years Old or Older? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Are you enrolled at CMU? ☐ Yes: Full-time ☐ Yes: Part-time  
☐ No: Not a Current CMU Student ☐ Not sure

For the purpose of the interview/scheduling, what are your Gender Pronouns (i.e. She/Her, They/Them, Hir/Hirs): \_\_\_\_\_

This study will center its findings around the experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) populations. Do you identify as a member of the TGNC community?

☐ Yes ☐ No

**Rights:** Your participation is voluntary. You are free to stop your participation at any point. Refusal to participate or withdrawal of your consent or discontinued participation in the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits or rights to which you might otherwise be entitled. The Principal Investigator may at her discretion remove you from the study for any of a number of reasons, including the basis of your responses above. In such an event, you will not suffer any penalty or loss of benefits or rights which you might otherwise be entitled.

**Right to Ask Questions & Contact Information:** If you have questions later, desire additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation please contact the Ashley Grice (Principal Investigator) by e-mail at [agrice@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:agrice@andrew.cmu.edu).

If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a research participant; or to report concerns to this study, you should contact the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at Carnegie Mellon University. Email: [irb-review@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:irb-review@andrew.cmu.edu) . Phone: 412-268-1901 or 412-268-5460.

1. Do you consent to receiving text messages at any point throughout the scheduling process?
2. ☐ Yes: Insert Best Contact number here:\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ No

Ashley R. Grice  
[Arg122@pitt.edu](mailto:Arg122@pitt.edu)  
[agrice@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:agrice@andrew.cmu.edu)

## Appendix C Consent Script & Interview Protocol

**Consent Script:** The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of current Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) graduate and undergraduate students at Carnegie Mellon University. I am conducting this study to investigate themes and experiences that TGNC students experience within the context of higher education, given the limited empirical data that currently exists surrounding the TGNC experience on college campuses. Participation in this study is voluntary.

**Procedures:** A 60-90 minute semi-structured Zoom interview will be conducted. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom, a feature used to capture experiences of the participant and to increase the accuracy of the data analysis process. At the beginning of the interview, participants will be asked some additional demographic questions. Post-interview, interviews will be transcribed for data analysis using a third-party application, Otter.ai and Zoom.

**Participant Requirements:** Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have a current affiliation as a graduate and/or undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University, and have a current gender identification with the Transgender and/or Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) community to participate in this study.

**Risks:** Zoom Recordings will then be transcribed using a third-party application (Otter.ai) to assist with data analysis and accuracy of data content, therefore there is an increased risk of breach of confidentiality. Zoom and Otter.ai will not be confined by any additional confidentiality agreements and may use any content stored on their platform at their discretion. Participation in this study could subject participants to additional or increased fatigue through the re-telling of potentially traumatic experiences surrounding their gender identification.

**Benefits:** There may be no personal benefit from your participation in the study but the knowledge received may be of value to humanity, faculty, staff, administrators working in higher education and future Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students

**Compensation & Costs:** There is no compensation for participation in this study. There will be no cost to you if you participate in this study.

**Future Use of Information:** In the future, once we have removed all identifiable information from your data (information) we may use the data for our future research studies, or we may distribute the data to other investigators for their research studies. We would do this without getting additional informed consent from you. Sharing of data with other researchers will only be done in such a manner that you will not be identified.

**Confidentiality:** By participating in the study, you understand and agree that Carnegie Mellon may be required to disclose your consent form, data and other personally identifiable information as

required by law, regulation, subpoena or court order. Otherwise, your confidentiality will be maintained in the following manner:

Your data and consent form will be kept separate. Your research data will be stored in a secure, password protected location. By participating, you understand and agree that the data and information gathered during this study may be used by Carnegie Mellon and published and/or disclosed by Carnegie Mellon to others outside of Carnegie Mellon. However, your name, address, contact information and other direct personal identifiers will not be mentioned in any such publication or dissemination of the research data and/or results by Carnegie Mellon. Note that per regulation and in collaborations with the University of Pittsburgh, all research data must be kept for a minimum of 7 years (3 years minimally for CMU).

No participant names or information will ever appear in reports or any analysis of data collected throughout this study.

The following steps will be taken to protect participants' identities during this study: (1) Each participant will be assigned a number; (2) The researchers will record any data collected during the study by number, not by name; (3) Any original recordings or data files will be stored in a secured location accessed only by authorized researchers.

**Consent required to proceed forward:**

- Given these conditions, do you agree to participate in today's 60-90 min interview? [If YES, continue. If NO, stop interview and thank them for their time.] Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may discontinue participation at any time.
- I would like to Zoom-record the conversations to check the accuracy of my notes. Do you agree to this? [If participant agreed to have interview recorded, start recording. If not, prepare to take detailed notes.]
- Do you have any questions before we begin? [Field questions, or say you'll reach back after consulting with Advisor/DiP Committee.]

**Opening Demographic Questions:** To start, I want to ask a couple demographic questions:

What is your current race/ethnicity?  
Are you a First-Generation College Student?  
Do you identify as an International Student?  
Do you identify yourself as an immigrant student?  
And lastly, what is your date of birth?

**Opening Question:** Tell me a little bit about yourself and how you'd describe your reasoning for choosing CMU to attend for your undergraduate or graduate degree?

**Content Questions** (with Probes):

Describe the types of on-campus resources you have used since you began attending Carnegie Mellon University?

**Question:** Describe your experiences (if applicable) with accessing housing throughout your experience as a TGNC student?

**Probe:** What was the process (if applicable) that you experience/d obtaining housing on or off campus?

**Question:** When discussing the context of gender, specifically individuals who identify as TGNC, the bathroom conversation is often a primary point of discussion. What are experiences regarding restrooms in the context of your gender identity?

**Probe:** How important is the “bathroom” conversation to you?

**Probe:** What has been your experiences surrounding bathroom availability and accessibility here at CMU?

**Probe:** What suggestions would you have for those making decisions regarding bathroom/restroom access for TGNC populations at Carnegie Mellon University?

**Question:** What do cisgender people need to know about how TGNC individuals experience and navigate campus within the context of restrooms/bathrooms at CMU?

**Question:** How often does “safety” become a part of your personal narrative when you think about your bathroom/restroom experiences here at Carnegie Mellon University?

**Question:** Focusing more on your experiences with faculty, staff and peer interactions—how would you describe your overall experience existing as a TGNC individual at CMU?

**Probe:** What specifically has been your experiences interfacing with:

Faculty as a TGNC individual?

With staff as a TGNC individual?

With your peers and other students as a TGNC individual?

**Question:** Please describe any negative or invalidating encounters with any of these groups (students, staff, faculty), what would you attribute to those experiences?

**Probe:** Are there other effective methods you would suggest or recommend that would improve or enhance experiences of TGNC students at Carnegie Mellon when interacting with fellow peers, staff and/or faculty? Describe some of the positive interactions you’ve had a CMU with regard to your gender identity?

**Probe:** How would you describe the contributing factors that allowed for you to have that interaction with that individual/s?

**Question:** How would you describe the available TGNC-specific resources that are available at CMU?

**Probe:** Can you list them and describe them to me?

**Probe:** what, if anything, do you feel is missing?

**Probe:** what, of those resources, have you found to be the most beneficial?

**Probe:** How has having said resources, or lack thereof, impacted your experience as a TGNC student at CMU?

**Useful Final Question:** Is there any further information that you would like to share with me that we have not covered?

**Closing Instructions:**

**Thank You:** This concludes the interview. Thank you again for taking the time to share your experiences with me. Should you have a desire to follow up or inquire on the progress of my study, I invite you to leave your contact information with me before you leave.



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